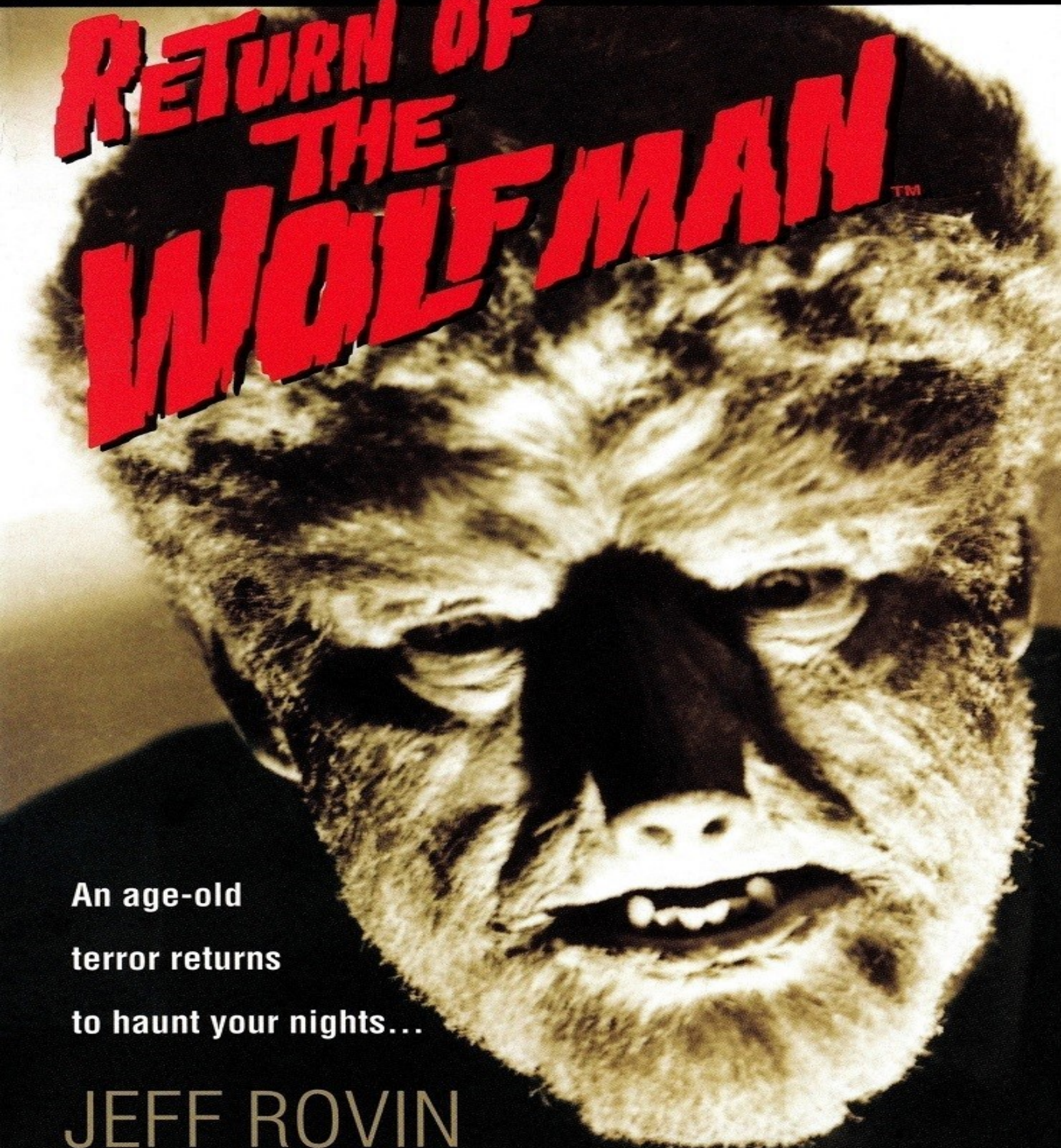
An All-New Novel Based on the Classic Universal Monsters

RETURN OF THE WOLF MAN™



An age-old
terror returns
to haunt your nights...

JEFF ROVIN

BOULEVARD

Even a man who's pure at heart
And says his prayers by night,
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms
And the autumn moon is bright . . .

The sleepy town of LaMirada is full of stories. Stories of a string of gruesome murders left unsolved fifty years ago. Of a terrifying beast-man lurking in the shadows at the scene of the attacks. And of the strange castle on the edge of the ocean, where the nightmare came to an end.

Now a new heir, Caroline Cooke, has come to the dark castle called the Tombs. And once again the little town is haunted by brutal murder, strange tales, and the mournful howls of an unknown creature. Some say he is crying out for the human blood on which he must feed. But others say that he is crying for release from his tormented form—release that only the lovely new occupant of the castle can give him . . .

Talbot's scream echoed for a moment and then died.

Caroline could hear him breathing, each breath shallow and labored. She watched as bristly hair grew along the side of his face and across his hairline. It sprouted so quickly and so fully that it just seemed to *appear*. His lips and nose darkened. His eyes narrowed as more fur grew. It seemed to be closing in on his face—down his forehead, inward along his cheeks, up his chin toward the mouth. As it did, the fur thickened and grew longer.

The werewolf growled and thrust his arm through the bars. Caroline screamed and fell back on the floor. Enraged, snarling and snapping, the Wolf Man twisted so that his arm stretched farther between the bars. The other hand gripped the bars, rattling them.

"God almighty," the deputy said and made the sign of the cross on his chest. "What is he?"

"A lycanthrope," Caroline said. "A werewolf."

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JEFF ROVIN

BASED ON THE CLASSIC UNIVERSAL MONSTERS

BERKLEY BOULEVARD BOOKS, NEW YORK

RETURN OF THE WOLF MAN

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“Even a man who’s pure at heart
And says his prayers by night.
May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms
And the autumn moon is bright.”

—WELSH VERSE

Thanks—

To Curt Siodmak, who wrote *The Wolf Man,* and to writers Edward T. Lowe, George Bricker, Dwight V. Babcock, Fredric I. Rinaldo, Robert Lees, and John Grant, who added to the legend.

To Lon Chaney, Jr., who played the character with humanity and dignity in his five screen appearances.

And to Jack Pierce, the makeup artist who designed the Wolf Man and many other great movie monsters.

RETURN *of the* WOLF MAN™

PROLOGUE

1948

I

The autumn night was thick with clouds as the Wolf Man pushed on the half-open door. He paused in the doorway, crouching on splayed fingers and toes, and squinted ahead. The bedroom was dark as the heavy oak door opened slowly, creaking noisily on hinges rusted by the sea breeze. After a moment the moon slipped from behind a cloud and painted the room a ghostly blue-white.

The Wolf Man's eyes, no sharper than in his mortal state, narrowed as they peered ahead. In front of him, on the right, was a large antique dresser. Beyond it was a wooden stand with a vase of long-dead flowers. He could smell their rankness, even here. The Wolf Man stole a quick glimpse to the left. There was a small canopy bed in the near corner, the lacy white fringe moving gently in the night air. Dolls sat neatly along the side of the bed against the wall; their dead eyes were staring, their smiles fixed. At the foot of the bed was a large chest. The werewolf looked at it carefully: the dust was thick and undisturbed. His eyes rose to old, framed photographs on the walls. They were sun-faded portraits of people, one of whom the werewolf felt he knew: a woman with dark hair and dark eyes. He remembered her as being pale, blanched not only of color but of feeling.

The werewolf's brain, only partly human, fought through the mental fog. *Who was she? What was her name? Mourn . . . mourn—Mornay?*

A disgusted snarl gurgled low in the Wolf Man's throat. This wasn't the time to try to think. Not when the Master of the Undead still walked the earth. The werewolf's eyes snapped ahead. On the opposite side of the room

dark-amber silk drapes undulated slowly in the gentle wind. The Wolf Man crept ahead then hesitated. His narrow eyes looked around with predatory vigilance.

His quarry wasn't hiding in the chest or on the balcony but was very near. The Wolf Man couldn't see him but he could smell him. The unmistakable stench of death was somewhere ahead—humid and rotting like wet leaves crushed in the soft earth. Death also had a shape—tall and upright, with blazing eyes and two ivory-white fangs. And until it had reached this room death had been moving—sometimes slowly like a mist, sometimes swiftly like a bat. But always fleeing. For all his powers the fiend was a coward.

The drapes waved, the corners flapping toward him as though beckoning. Beyond them the balcony doors were thrown wide open, their panes lightly flecked with droplets of sea. The werewolf's short snout crinkled as the warm night air assaulted him with other smells—the salt of the ocean and the stink of fish living and dead. The perfume of a woman sitting on the beach. The sweet and sour odor of hammock trees and mangroves in the fetid swamps. Yet none of these smells was as powerful as the stench of his prey. The tart odor of blood was as long and heavy as the cloak that flapped behind Count Dracula.

The werewolf lifted his right foot. The claws retracted slightly as he did. The thick pads on the bottoms of his feet were damp with perspiration. He crept forward once again, the wooden boards creaking. He stopped just before the dresser. His thick chest expanded slowly as he sniffed the air. The rich smell of blood was closer now. His narrow eyes shifted to the left and then to the right. The smell was all around him but where was the vampire? The monster's semihuman mind was confused.

He gurgled with rising anger. Spittle collected at the sides of his mouth, eager for a kill. Suddenly, the gurgle became a growl as he realized why he couldn't see his ancient enemy. Slowly, the Wolf Man looked up.

Count Dracula was clinging to the high rococo ceiling in the center of the room. He hung there spiderlike, his fingertips pressed to the plaster. The vampire's head was turned around, looking down at him with eyes that were red slits. His satin cape clung to him, also defying gravity. The cloak outlined the stocky, blood-bloated contour of his body.

Suddenly, Count Dracula's off-white teeth flashed. Bloody mist swirled down from his mouth, hot and moist. With a hiss, the vampire dropped as though he were weightless. He turned in midfall, his cloak billowing behind him, and landed on his feet. He immediately jumped to the opposite side of the dresser. His long white fingers closed around the top of the antique and, with another exhalation of foul red breath, he easily overturned the dresser in the Wolf Man's path. Then the vampire spun and ran toward the balcony.

The werewolf's snarl became a roar as he vaulted over the dresser. He landed on all fours, the thick muscles of his arms and legs rippling beneath his fur. His own musky smell permeated the air, mingling with the blood-rich scent of the vampire.

The vampire stopped. He spun toward the werewolf, his dark brows knit over his fiery eyes. The Wolf Man stopped and glared back at Count Dracula. There was something new in the vampire's eyes—dark shapes, which seemed to be growing larger and coming toward him. They seemed to be flying.

Bats. They were two great, black bats slowly merging into one.

"Stay!" the vampire commanded.

There was something soothing in the rhythmic movement of their wings, in the swirling red haze behind them. They transfixed the Wolf Man, caused his muscles to relax and his mind to drift. He stayed. He thought of more successful hunts, of less troublesome prey. He found himself yearning for them. How satisfying they were to scent and stalk and kill.

The Wolf Man was no longer thinking about Dracula. He was thinking about humans, the satisfaction of leaping at them from behind. They'd scream as his knifelike claws plunged into the sinew of their shoulders or their soft upper arms. Sometimes he'd drive a claw up along their spine, the sharp nails digging into their flesh like hooks. The victims would scream and struggle helplessly as his two long, sharp lower canines dug into their throat, holding it in place. And they'd burble for a moment—but only for a moment, as his flat-topped incisors closed on the raw wound. Then the teeth would come together and shear the flesh and slice open the jugular vein. The victims always went limp after that as blood pumped out in lively spurts. The metallic taste of that blood, the sweet satisfaction of the flesh

calmed the wildness in him. He felt like he did now, eager to put the night and the chase behind him.

No—it was a trick!

His throat was parched and his teeth ached. He had not killed. He was not sated. He roared and his mind returned to him. The bats vanished and the red haze became white moonlight and the Wolf Man was once more looking at the monster he had been pursuing since his transformation in the castle laboratory.

The vampire exposed his teeth and hissed. Most of the werewolf's victims never saw him, let alone fled. But this creature, this awful, tenacious vampire—he was different. Count Dracula's strength, his senses, and his reflexes were nearly equal to his own. The vampire seemed to be afraid but there was none of the naked panic that overcame humans. Count Dracula wasn't like that fat little man the werewolf had tried to attack just minutes before. When the full moon had risen above the laboratory window, the Wolf Man had been looking down at captive game: a small, chubby man strapped to a gurney. It would have been a pleasure to feed on him, to watch the fear drain from him along with his lifeblood. Then Count Dracula arrived and everything changed. The Wolf Man and the vampire fought; as they overturned metal worktables and electronic consoles, glass vials shattered on the floor and released sickening fumes and clouds of green and yellow smoke.

Count Dracula!

The Wolf Man shook his head furiously as he heard the name in his head. Pieces of human memory came to him, like shards of dream. They told the Wolf Man that he had come here to destroy the vampire, though he couldn't remember why. Not that it was important. The vampire was a rival, another creature of the night. That was reason enough to want to destroy him. Even London, where they'd been until recently, had not been large enough to accommodate two ravenous predators.

The werewolf rose slowly. His tawny, bristle-like fur bunched tightly beneath his white trousers and black button-down shirt. Count Dracula continued to stare at his adversary with baleful eyes. But the swirling haze and the bats were gone. Red saliva trickled down the vampire's bared fangs. The werewolf showed his own teeth. They were yellow near the pale pink

gums, white near the crowns. The vampire hissed again and began backing toward the small, alabaster balcony. Frustrated by this long chase, and angered by the vampire's attempt to attack his mind, the Wolf Man roared and lunged.

The vampire turned to his left, grabbed the ceramic vase from its stand, and flung it at his adversary. The werewolf ducked easily and the vase shattered behind him. With a cry of rage and desperation, Count Dracula spun and ran onto the balcony. He was outside in two long strides.

The Wolf Man hunched low and bolted forward. There was nowhere for the vampire to go. The thick spittle that had collected in the corners of his black-lipped mouth spilled over his chin as he anticipated the kill.

Count Dracula reached the balustrade and stopped running. He faced the sea; the waves crashed loudly over fifty feet below. The vampire raised his arms and spread his cape. The wind filled the cloak, the fabric flapping slowly. Borne by the sea breeze, the smell of blood filled the room behind him. Moonlight glinted off the vampire's dark, slick hair. It shone on the shiny folds of his cape, on the large ring he wore on his left hand, on his naked fangs. Beneath him, all along the dark, moss-covered northern face of the castle, the denizens of the dark froze—but only for a moment. The moths and spiders quickly turned wings and legs elsewhere. Rats sunk low and crept quietly into drainage ditches, seeking sanctuary under the granite walls. Owls fell silent beneath wide and frightened eyes. The night was no longer theirs.

The Wolf Man reached the balcony doors and he also stopped, though not out of deference to the Prince of Darkness. There had been a change in the vampire, something subtle. The werewolf's large, sensitive ears cocked forward. He listened as the vampire's normally rapid heart began drumming even faster. Faster, yet softer. *Smaller.* The werewolf dimly remembered other times when the creature's heartbeat had changed. First his heartbeat and then the rest of the vampire, transforming into a mist or a wolf or—

A bat. If he changed into a bat Dracula could lose himself in the night, return to his coffin.

The Wolf Man howled from deep inside as the vampire's change came faster. His cape began to shrink and tighten. The cloak lost its luster as the satin became leather. The vampire's legs withered and rose and dangled in

the air beneath his compacting torso. His shoes and socks became spurlike calcars on each foot and his toes stretched into small, sharp claws. The hair on his head shortened into bristly fur and the head itself grew smaller and darker. Count Dracula's ears sharpened and his nostrils flared into wicked gashes. His fingers lengthened into delicate ribs along the top of his cape. And then, save for the flapping of its great wings, the large gray bat rose silently above the balcony.

Oblivious to his surroundings, aware of nothing but his prey, the Wolf Man raced onto the balcony. His mouth was pulled wide in a cry of rage, saliva flying from the sides as he ran. As the vampire took flight, the werewolf planted his shaggy left foot on the top of the balustrade. He hurled himself after the creature. The bat veered to the right and the werewolf's right hand shot out. He snatched the vampire around the torso and pulled it to his breast. The winged creature squealed as the two beasts hung in the air for a moment, suspended by the bat's frantic flapping.

In that instant, as they hung in the warm night wind, the Wolf Man knew he'd lost this fight. He could clearly see both bat-wings: neither of them bore the sign of the red pentagram, the symbol that always glowed bloody and clear on the right hand of his next victim. Count Dracula would survive this encounter.

Unless—

Unless he could hold on to the vampire until sunrise. A fragment of human memory told the Wolf Man that it wasn't necessary for the vampire to die beneath his rending claws. If he could prevent Count Dracula from returning to his coffin, the vampire would perish under the gentle caress of morning.

The bat's strength ebbed and his wings slowed and suddenly the two figures were plummeting through the night. The creatures were still locked together, the vampire biting and scratching at his captor as they somersaulted slowly toward the dark, churning ocean. As they fell, the werewolf didn't know whether the roar in his ears was the howling of the wind or his own ferocious cry.

They hit the choppy water hard and threw up a towering funnel of sea. The white-capped geyser cascaded around them, the sound deafening, the cold spray chilling. Tossed and pulled by the powerful currents, the mortal

enemies fell deeper into the sea. Though he was winded from the landing, the werewolf fought to hold his struggling quarry. He was guided by instinct rather than reason, the awareness that he must not let Count Dracula go. Shafts of moonlight penetrated the blackness as the Wolf Man held tightly to his violently thrashing prey. The swirling sands and salt water stung his eyes and rocks jutting from the shoal punched his back and sides. His lungs ached for breath. But the Wolf Man would not release his prey. The animal heart in him did not understand surrender.

Then, through the murky waters, the werewolf saw the green-rusted remains of an ancient anchor. Fighting the ruthless undertow, the Wolf Man twisted in an attempt to thrust the bat onto a pointed fluke. But as the werewolf turned, the vampire's beating wings and slashing teeth quickly gave way to powerful arms and mighty fangs. Count Dracula once again assumed human form and with an explosion of strength he broke free. He arched away like a giant manta, leaving a trail of seaweed and silt in his wake. And then the vampire was gone, swallowed by the gloomy waters.

Aching for air, the Wolf Man shot to the surface. Wave-tossed against a mossy outcropping of rock, he clawed to the rounded top and clung there as the ocean beat around him. The sound and smell of the vampire was already gone. The details of the conflict also faded quickly. There was a trace of human despair, of human frustration in the Wolf Man's intense eyes. But it passed quickly. Exhausted and weak, what the werewolf felt most intensely right now was the need to feed.

He dug his toes into the rock and brought his legs up under him. Crouching, he leaned forward on his claws. He sniffed the air. Almost immediately he was distracted by other smells, smells that beckoned and tempted him. He looked along the shore of the island, toward the cove. The water broke high and loud on the rocks, obscuring his view. But he didn't need to see. He smelled a woman and a man there as well as something else. Something uninviting. The odor of dead flesh. He had smelled it earlier this evening in the laboratory, where the vampire had kept his giant —the monster constructed long ago, made of bodies torn from the grave or plucked from the gallows. Following his nose, the werewolf was able to pick out the pale green giant beyond the breakers. The creature was standing on the end of a dock, throwing crates and barrels at a rowboat. The

Wolf Man dimly remembered fighting the monster once, also in water. In a flood at a different castle.

Almost at once there was another smell. It was coming from behind the giant; the tart odor of petrol. Waves splashed around the Wolf Man, covering him with spray as he watched the man creep behind the giant. He spilled the petrol on the wharf, struck a match, touched the flame to a rag, and dropped it on the dock. With a roar, the fire shot along the dock, eagerly consuming the old wood. The monster turned and waved his long, stiff arms at the blaze. His pale-green flesh glowed orange as the flames swept toward him. With nowhere else to go the monster finally moved forward, into the blaze, either hoping to get through it or finally embracing death . . . a yearning the Wolf Man knew well. The smell of the giant's dead flesh burning was flat and uninteresting, yet also gratifying. The Wolf Man vaguely recalled having come here because of this creature too, though he couldn't remember why.

The werewolf snarled. Thinking was difficult and annoyed him. It was better to want or need and simply act on his desires. And right now his only want and need was to feed.

The werewolf turned his attention to the calm waters ahead and to the men in a rowboat. He recognized the fat man from the laboratory and his lanky friend, the man who had led him to this island from the mainland. Even hundreds of yards away the werewolf could sense the men's pervasive fear. He liked that. Desperation caused the blood to rush through prey and permeate the flesh. It not only added a sense of power to the hunt, it made the meat easier to tear.

The werewolf needed only one kill to satisfy his blood-lust. He decided he would kill the fat one. His fear was greater than any the Wolf Man had ever sensed. His heart would be beating much faster. His flesh would be the more succulent.

Just then the two men jumped from their rowboat and began swimming away. The Wolf Man growled. Though he was angry to lose the fat man, he didn't like hunting in water. It was difficult to move when his fur became wet and heavy. The sea also forced him to stay close to his quarry because the water washed away their scent. He didn't have the opportunity to stalk and surprise them. And the werewolf was already tired from his struggle

with Count Dracula. He didn't want to fight the currents, the waves, the wind.

Reluctantly, the werewolf turned his ears and bloodstained eyes toward the man and woman he'd seen at the dock. The man had joined the woman now and they were walking away from the fire. His arm was around her protectively and they were heading slowly toward the castle. Though they were involved in themselves and unaware of their surroundings, the Wolf Man knew he'd have to be careful. The man might be preoccupied with the woman, but he'd been clever enough to rescue her from Count Dracula and to destroy the Monster.

Sliding back into the water, the arm-weary werewolf allowed the waves to carry him back to shore. Upon reaching the rocky beach, he shook himself off. Crouching behind a boulder, he sniffed to make certain he was alone. There were no other humans on the island. Count Dracula, his eternal nemesis, was also gone. And he could no longer smell the rancid presence of the giant. The dock had collapsed into the sea; hissing clouds of gray smoke rolled over the water, obscuring whatever sight and smell remained of the creature.

The Wolf Man bent low and bared his teeth. Alone with his prey, he watched as they neared the castle. The stone edifice sat on a high, rocky hill, the silhouette imposing against the moon-bathed sky. The dark outline of its thick towers and monolithic walls reminded the werewolf of other castles, other times. The images were indistinct, incomplete, confusing. The only thing that was the same after all these years was the unconquerable need that drove him forward, that compelled him to kill with violent swiftness.

Arms cocked, elbows locked into his sides, the werewolf crouched low. His claws raking the damp earth, he remained downwind of the couple as he ran toward the jagged, sloping cliff.

II

For tall, lean Professor Charles Bradstreet Stevens III, it had been infatuation at first sight.

The young, dark-eyed Professor Stevens had only met insurance investigator Joan Raymond that evening, when she'd come to Mornay Castle with shipping clerks Chick Young and Wilbur Grey. The young neurosurgeon was immediately taken with her beauty. Her shoulder-length blond hair and dazzling hazel eyes. A sly, disarming smile and cherry-red lips. She looked especially exotic in the Gypsy wardrobe she still had on, the costume she'd worn to the masquerade ball on the Florida mainland. Technically, Joan had been Wilbur's date. But the chubby young Don Juan was also escorting Dr. Mornay to the party so it was Stevens who sat with Miss Raymond on the boat to the town of LaMirada. Stevens also danced with her. That was when she had confided in him that she was an insurance investigator looking into the activities of Young and Grey. The two didn't seem bright enough to pull off anything complex or shady, but that wasn't his concern. Stevens was just glad the lady was there. He'd been attracted by her beauty, then smitten by her sharp wit, grace, and intelligence. Now he was also drawn to her strength. She had survived an encounter with the strange and charismatic Count Dracula.

Sensing that she was a threat to his plan to revitalize the giant Monster of Frankenstein, Count Dracula had put her into a deep trance and taken her back to the castle. When Stevens followed, he found her locked in Dr. Mornay's bedroom, her heart rate dangerously slow. But she had shown incredible resilience and courage. Not only did she recover when Count Dracula plunged into the sea and vanished, but she insisted that they stay and destroy the Frankenstein Monster on the dock. If it had been up to Stevens, he would have taken her away in the powerboat and come back in the morning to finish the job.

Brave girl, Stevens had thought at the time. By then his infatuation was turning to love.

Now, as the embers of the burnt pilings flickered behind them, and the smoke from the fire dissipated, Stevens told Joan that before they left the island he had to get something important from the castle. In spite of her recent experiences there, she agreed to accompany him. *Damned* brave girl.

The sound of crickets was close around them and moonlight was spilling from around the edges of a long, sharp-edged cloud. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted, its voice swallowed by the crashing waves. If this were anywhere else in the world, Stevens felt, it would be a desperately romantic moment. But despite the disappearance of Count Dracula and the death of the Frankenstein Monster, there was still a powerful sense of evil on the tiny island. It shrouded the castle and rose from the very earth beneath them. He felt its presence as cold, sudden gusts in the humid air—chill ribbons that brushed the face and twined around the hands and arms as though they were things alive. He had experienced these same sensations, though not as powerfully, when patients had died during his internship. Stevens wondered if Joan felt it too but decided not to ask. She'd been through enough without having to focus on the cold presence that enveloped them.

After walking in silence for a short while, Stevens decided to ask the young investigator why she had been following Young and Grey. She told him that her company, Shippers Insurance, had sent her from the home office in New York to look into the disappearance of two exhibits bound for McDougal's House of Horrors: the remains of the legendary vampire Count Dracula and the Frankenstein Monster. At first, she'd assumed that railroad baggage clerks Young and Grey had stolen the bodies to sell to a third party like the Lampini family, who had been angry runners-up in the bidding. Or else, she suspected, the clerks may have hidden the bodies at the behest of James Karl McDougal so he could collect the insurance.

"I never imagined the creatures were alive and had left the shipping crates on their own," she said softly, shaking her head. "My God. Even now I find it difficult to believe. And I don't think my boss, Mr. Foley, will believe it either."

"It is incredible," Stevens agreed. "But we saw what we saw."

"Would you mind telling that to Mr. Foley?" she said with a laugh.

It was a nervous laugh, the residue of a night of horror. Stevens wanted to hold her.

"Of course I'll tell him," Stevens said.

"Thanks, but I was kidding," Joan said. "It won't help. He'll tell me to take a long vacation and write one or two of the mystery stories I've been threatening to write and then come back rested. Meanwhile, he'll turn it over to one of the men on the staff. As if somebody's physical appointments determine how well a job gets done."

"It's an unfair world," Stevens admitted. "But you know—it doesn't matter what Mr. Foley says. That vampire was real. So was the lycanthrope who fell into the ocean with him—"

"The who?"

"Lycanthrope," Stevens replied. "That's the scientific term for a werewolf. It's from the Greek *lykanthrōpos,* or 'wolf-man.' "

"Sweet lord," she said. "I can't believe there's actually a term for it."

"Oh, there's a term for just about every strange life-form, aberration, sickness, or phobia. Creatures like that wolf-man have been reported since the dawn of civilization. As for the Frankenstein Monster, we have proof that he existed. The notebook of Dr. Frankenstein."

"Is that what we're going back for?" Joan asked.

Stevens nodded. "The sheriff will want to investigate all of this. I want to get the notebook before he confiscates it."

Joan shuddered. "I saw the journal earlier this evening, while I was up in Dr. Mornay's bedroom powdering my nose. It was chilling—all about stealing bodies and charging them with lightning."

"Chilling but fascinating," Stevens said. "The journal proves that Dr. Frankenstein succeeded in restoring life to dead tissue, and that he used his discoveries to create the Monster."

"Do you think he did that intentionally? Created a monster?"

"No," said Stevens. "I believe there was something wrong with the brain Dr. Frankenstein gave him. I also believe that Count Dracula and Dr. Mornay were planning to fix that mistake. To give the Monster a new brain

to make him more obedient." Stevens suddenly stopped and pressed a palm to the back of his head. He rubbed gently along his short black hair.

"What's wrong?" Joan asked.

"Got a shooting pain down my neck." Stevens grimaced. "A memento of my one big act of defiance. When I confronted Count Dracula about his plans to revive the Monster, Dr. Mornay snuck up behind me. Gave me a good whack on the parietal bone—the right side of the skull."

Joan frowned at him. "I know where that is. I may not have worked with lycanthropes, but I have worked with forensics."

"Sorry," Stevens said. "I'm used to my first-year students at Johns Hopkins."

"Do you want to stop and sit for a while?"

Stevens looked around. More than ever, out there in the blackness, he felt the presence of something malevolent. "I don't think so," he said. He stopped feeling his head. "It seems okay."

They continued walking.

"So you teach medicine?" Joan said.

"I do. And I'm going to have a heck of a story to tell those kids when I get back."

"I'm curious," Joan said. "How does a college professor become involved with someone like Dr. Mornay?"

"Strange fortune," he admitted. "Sandra and I were students together at New York University before the war. We rarely agreed on ethical matters, but she was a fascinating woman. Her grandfather, Sandor Mornay, built the castle from stones quarried in his native Hungary. He was an infamous surgeon."

"Infamous in what way?" Joan asked.

"I understand he performed experimental surgery and vivisections."

"Goodness. How awful!"

Stevens nodded. "Apparently, H. G. Wells was once a houseguest at his estate in Europe. Reportedly, he fictionalized Sandor Mornay as his notorious villain Dr. Moreau. Sandor's son Miklos, Sandra's father, wasn't much better. Inspired by Henry Frankenstein's work, he used electricity not

to revive the dead but to try to give additional strength and stamina to the bodies of the living. I believe he succeeded only in immolating dozens of people."

"That's quite a heritage," Joan remarked. "No wonder Dr. Mornay turned out the way she did."

"I tried to empathize with her in college," Stevens said. "Lord, how I tried. But she was a real Mornay. Her mother ran off when Sandra was fifteen and she chose to remain with her father. Her own fascination was for organ transplants. In fact, she was forced to leave the university after putting the brain of a dead child into the body of a chimpanzee."

"Was the operation a success?" Joan asked.

Stevens looked at her. "It was, albeit briefly."

Joan shuddered.

"Dr. Mornay was brilliant," Stevens said, "though she was much too ruthless, too driven."

"I don't understand," Joan said. "If you have such contempt for her, why did you come to LaMirada?"

"Fair question," Stevens admitted, "and you'll probably think I deserve that conk on the head for being such a dunce. Several months ago, she wrote and asked me to come down during midsemester break to help with her experiments in electrical cellular regeneration of the cerebral cortex. I had very mixed feelings about her request. The work was intriguing, obviously, but her reputation for unorthodoxy could not be ignored. I finally agreed to assist for three weeks because she promised to donate the equipment to the university when she was finished."

"So your interest was mostly mercenary?"

Stevens smiled. "Let's say it was *partly* mercenary. She was going to do the work whether I assisted or not. The gift was to override my moral reservations. But I'd also heard that Dr. Mornay spent the war working in a laboratory in the Tyrolean Alps. I was curious to see what she'd come up with. Obviously, she'd come up with Dr. Frankenstein's notebook . . . and his Monster."

"And Count Dracula?"

“I don’t know where he fits in,” Stevens said. “Until tonight, I only knew him as Dr. Lejos, his nom de guerre. I think he helped Dr. Mornay get out of Europe and also paid for the equipment. But how they met, I don’t know. Perhaps he was hiding with the Monster somewhere. Maybe the creatures were coffinmates.”

“That isn’t funny,” Joan said.

“Sorry,” Stevens replied.

Joan stopped when they reached the heavy door with its oversized ring knocker. She looked back toward the cove and pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders.

“Cold?” Stevens asked.

She nodded. “There’s something strange in the air. The proverbial icy fingers.”

“I know,” he said. “I feel them too.”

“Do you think the Monster is really dead?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure that poor, cold thing was ever really alive,” Stevens said. “He was merely animate. As to whether we’ve destroyed him, I don’t know.”

“He was caught in the middle of the fire,” Joan said. “How *could* he have survived?”

“He was *made* to survive,” Stevens said. “That was one of Dr. Frankenstein’s goals. To transcend death. Back in medical school old Dr. Jeffrey Garth, a professor of psychiatry and an expert in the occult, told stories we all *thought* were legends. About how the Frankenstein Monster had been burned in a windmill, blown up in a laboratory, knocked into a sulphur pit, washed away in a dam explosion, swallowed by quicksand, and incinerated in a chemical fire. Apparently, he survived them all.”

“So a fiery pool of gasoline may not have done the job,” Joan said. “And if my company decides to dredge up the body rather than pay McDougal—”

“It may run amok again,” Stevens said. He looked back across the sea where the last of the smoke was rising in thin, snaking plumes. “The once-human brain in the Monster’s skull was reconditioned by Dr. Frankenstein to act like a sort of storage battery. The Monster was powered by electricity that it absorbed, I believe, through the terminal electrodes in his neck.”

Stevens nodded toward the cove. “He’s lying in salt water, which is an excellent conductor. It may be possible for him to soak up enough ambient energy to survive.”

“How can we prevent that from happening?”

Stevens looked at her. The color had returned to her high-boned cheeks and her hazel eyes were steady. The scientist never thought of himself as a particularly brave man. But for this woman he knew he’d fight a house of Frankensteins.

“We *try* to prevent it by going inside and getting Dr. Frankenstein’s notebook,” he said. “That’s the reason I want it. The journal may contain information about how to reverse the process, how to drain the Monster’s energies away.”

“Is the notebook still upstairs?”

Stevens shook his head. It hurt. He had to remember not to do that. “The last I saw it was in the laboratory,” he said, “along with the notebooks of Miklos Mornay. But knowing Dr. Mornay she may have hidden it. She may have hidden them all and then fled. We have to find out.” He turned toward the massive door, pushed on it with both hands, then looked back. “Are you coming?”

“Maybe in a few minutes,” Joan said. “I’d like to get a little more fresh air. But you go.”

Stevens looked around. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to be out here alone.”

Joan grinned. “Count Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster, and your lycanthrope are all underwater,” she said. “I can handle a few crickets and a lonely owl.”

“I’m thinking about Dr. Mornay,” Stevens said. “I haven’t seen her. There’s always a chance that she hasn’t run off.”

“If she’s here,” Joan said, “she’ll probably be inside, looking for the journal. In which case I’ll be safe out here.”

Stevens smiled and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “All right, Joan,” he said. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.” He pushed again on the massive oak door. It groaned on ancient hinges and he stepped inside.

As the unnaturally chilly air swirled around them, neither Professor Stevens nor Joan Raymond noticed the crickets and the owl suddenly go quiet or saw the shadowy figure who watched from behind hanging garlands of Spanish moss.

III

Years ago and a world away, in Llanwelly Village in Wales, a small, elderly Gypsy woman named Maleva had shown compassion to a young man named Lawrence Talbot.

Llanwelly Village was a rustic place hidden in a beautiful green valley, a quaint Eden in a pestilent world. It was founded in 1350 by families who, following a priest, Father de Brulier, fled the Black Death, which was devastating the cities and towns of England. The plague passed over Llanwelly Village, earning the town a reputation as being favored by God. In order to keep the land clean and the bloodline pure, the Llanwellians did not permit many outsiders to settle there and churchgoing was mandatory. Wanderers who passed through the village were never permitted to stay in the town proper, but were forced to camp in the surrounding woods. Dotted with marshes and perpetually carpeted with mist, Wanderers' Woods became the seat of tales about demons and unnatural predators, warlocks and witches, ghosts and the living dead. The Talbots—who were mostly physicians and men of science—worked mightily to dispel many of these local legends.

As it happened, the devil was waiting for Lawrence Talbot in Wanderers' Woods. The devil in the form of a man-wolf. Talbot became a werewolf after being bitten by Maleva's son Bela, who was himself a werewolf. When Talbot managed to kill Bela with a silver-topped cane, Maleva did not hold that against him. To the contrary. She was relieved that her son's suffering had ended. After the attack, Maleva brought Talbot home. The next night, when he transformed and was caught in a wolf trap, she was there to free him. And when Talbot's own father, Sir John, police captain Paul Montford, Dr. Lloyd, and others called Talbot mad for insisting that he had become a bloodthirsty werewolf, the gracious old Gypsy woman helped to preserve his sanity by believing him. She even gave Talbot a charm that would have protected him from the curse had he not given it to his love,

Gwen Conliffe. Years later, Maleva accompanied Talbot to the Bohemian town of Vasaria in a doomed effort to find Dr. Frankenstein . . . and a cure.

A Gypsy woman had helped Talbot through the first hellish days of his death-in-life. And the human consciousness buried within the Wolf Man, the suppressed part that was still Lawrence Talbot, remembered her kindness. Because of that, the Wolf Man would spare the woman he had seen at the dock—the Gypsy woman who was standing by the castle door. He would hunt the man instead.

His nose twitched as he sniffed the air. Though the man had entered the castle, the werewolf easily picked up his scent. It was coming from high along the side of the building. The Wolf Man moved quickly and silently in that direction. The thickly padded balls of his feet sank into the soft earth as the werewolf slipped behind the lazy curtains of Spanish moss. His eyes shifting from side to side, the Wolf Man brushed aside the high grasses and thin-stalked tiger lilies. The underbrush ahead of him rustled as nocturnal birds and mammals scurried away—an act of deference as old as life itself, the flight of lesser hunters from the king of predators.

The Wolf Man stayed wide of the castle until he reached the side. Then, as he crept closer, his small black nose crinkled and his head jerked this way and that. After a moment he determined exactly where the man-spoor was coming from. Glancing up, he saw a smashed window and smelled the man beyond it. But he also smelled someone else nearby—Count Dracula. Baring his incisors, the werewolf crept through the last of the grasses and saw the body of a woman. She was lying below the broken window amid blood, shattered glass, and splinters of wood. What the Wolf Man had recognized was the foul stench of Count Dracula's blood mixed with the woman's blood. The surgical mask she'd been wearing had been torn away and as the Wolf Man neared he recognized her. It was the vampire's pale-skinned companion. The werewolf opened his mouth wide and exhaled hotly, angrily. He did not feed on carrion. Looking disdainfully away from her remains, he padded toward the castle wall.

The shattered window was halfway up the high corner tower of the castle. With a low snarl, the Wolf Man bunched his legs beneath him. He jumped to a low window outside the castle library, then reached for the blanket of vines and ivy that covered the wall above it. As he climbed, a

cloud slipped away from the moon, which shined clear in a blue-black sky. The reappearance of the full moon was comforting, though the color of the sky was not. Soon it would be dawn. If he hadn't fed by then, the werewolf's hold on the soul of Lawrence Talbot would weaken. Whenever the Wolf Man had transformed in a locked hotel room or dank prison cell, unable to kill, Talbot had returned faster and more forcefully in the morning. Except for the few times when he had been forced into hibernation by wounds or natural disasters, the Wolf Man had never missed more than one full moon evening's feeding.

There were large stone griffins on either side of the window. Their wings were spread wide and their eyes were turned heavenward, as though they wished to soar. Only their beaklike mouths were downturned, a mournful acknowledgment of their earthbound state. The werewolf felt a sad kinship with the statues.

When he was within arm's reach of the griffin on the left, the Wolf Man stopped climbing. He listened, sniffed. The man was still inside. It sounded as though he was moving things around.

Saliva pooled around the werewolf's thick tongue. He reached up. The claws of his shaggy hands closed around the base of the statue, its once-proud wings and face pocked and eroded from the salty air. The Wolf Man pulled himself up and perched low on the sill. He looked inside. The man was noisily pushing aside a piece of equipment. Though the full moon threw the Wolf Man's elongated shadow across the floor, the man was oblivious to it.

The werewolf watched the man for a moment. It was rare that the hunter was able to watch a mortal man hunt. Grunting and breathing hard, this man was clearly searching for something. Finally, he picked up something that had been lying beneath the equipment—a thin book. With obvious excitement the man held the book in both hands. He stared at the cover and said something to himself.

Words were difficult for the Wolf Man to understand so he ignored them. He was glad the man was happy. Happy people were distracted. When the attack came it would be more of a shock, his fear more palpable.

Rising on the clawed tips of his toes, the werewolf judged the man's distance. A single leap would be sufficient to cover the distance between

them. Fixing his eyes on the victim's exposed throat, the Wolf Man opened his mouth wide in a soundless expression of anticipation. Then, sitting back on his coiled legs, the werewolf jumped.

IV

Just standing outside the castle made Joan Raymond feel vulnerable, though she didn't know exactly why. She also didn't know to what. But she needed to move and decided to go for a little walk. She turned to her right, toward the side of the castle and the sea. Beyond the water were the winking lights of LaMirada—the playground of the rich which had become a hideaway for the damned. Part of her had always believed that ghosts and devils could exist—the same part that wanted to believe in God and His angels. But her rational side had always beaten down the spiritual side. Even now, though the woman had felt the cold touch and hot eyes of the undead, her logical mind sought some other explanation. Perhaps they were hallucinations caused by the gloomy castle, compounded by the masquerade ball on the island. Or maybe they were a hypnotic trick. Yet reason could not overcome desire. As frightened as she'd been, she *wanted* to believe.

Her Gypsy jewelry jangling, Joan enjoyed the invigorating wash of the bay wind. It helped her shake off the long, choking shadow of Count Dracula. Helped sweep away the wispy remnants of dense fog that had clouded her mind. Helped deaden the memory of the blazing red bat's eyes that had burned through her will and transfixed her. She used to think she was strong, tough. But the vampire had effortlessly cut through her defenses. It had been a humbling experience.

She took a long breath of salty air. She smiled at the moon, then followed its light to the turret of the castle tower, down its lumpy walls to the dark windows, one of which was shattered. Then she looked down at the deeply shadowed grounds—

Joan stopped. There was something lying just ahead on a field of broken glass.

No, she thought after staring at it for a moment. Not something. Some*one.*

Joan ran over, caution forgotten for the moment. Her high heels stuck in the soil and she tried running on the toes of her shoes. She nearly tripped

and fell and finally pulled the shoes off. The cold earth felt good on her bare feet.

The body was lying on its left side, its back to her. Kneeling beside it, Joan turned it toward her; it was Dr. Mornay. Her lab coat was covered with slivers of glass. Though her mask had come off, the scientist was still wearing the white surgical cap and rubber gloves she'd had on in the laboratory.

The insurance investigator picked up the scientist's wrist. It was cold. She felt for a pulse then held a finger under Dr. Mornay's nose. There was no sign of life.

Joan looked up at the castle. The scientist must have been pushed or thrown from the laboratory window. She looked back down at the white and broken figure.

"You poor, misguided soul," Joan said. There had been a tragic majesty in the demise of the Frankenstein Monster, its arms outstretched as it strode through the fire—almost as though it were finally welcoming destruction. But there was nothing heroic in the death of this poor woman.

Joan rose. As she did, she noticed ugly bruises on the back of Dr. Mornay's bloody right leg. She'd been gripped by something powerful. Since Count Dracula had been fighting the Wolf Man, she assumed that this was the work of the Frankenstein Monster. It was ironic, thought Joan. The creature she had helped to revive had ended up destroying her.

Joan looked back toward the front of the castle. Whether or not Stevens had found the journal of Dr. Frankenstein, she was going to have to telephone the mainland and ask the sheriff to come out. Concealing knowledge of a homicide would only serve to cast suspicion on them.

As she started toward the door, a bestial howl ripped through the castle and poured through the windows. The cry echoed across the island even after Professor Stevens's squeals of terror and pain had begun.

"Professor!" Joan cried.

Silence.

"Professor! What is it?"

The young woman turned and ran to the castle, losing her shoes as she ran. She was tired but alert as she pulled open the massive door and stepped

into the candlelit entranceway. A wind followed her through the open door and puffed out the candles. She stopped and listened. The professor screamed again, just once, and she followed the cry to the brightly lit laboratory.

Though the castle was dark and chilly and the stones were cold on her bare feet, perspiration ran down Joan's throat and trickled between her breasts. She was hot and frightened yet she didn't consider running away. Professor Stevens was in trouble. Besides, the sensual appeal of mystery and danger were qualities that had compelled her to become an insurance investigator in the first place. No relationship, no other job, had ever made her feel so alive.

She swung through the open laboratory door and froze there.

During her seven years of specializing in missing persons and lost goods for Shippers Insurance, the twenty-nine-year-old had witnessed many horrors. In addition to the routine shootings and bludgeonings and knifings, there was the body of the union organizer who had been thrown in front of a speeding train in Poughkeepsie and the corpse of the New Orleans shipping magnate, which had been stuffed inside a fish barrel where it lay undiscovered for twelve days. Then there was the publisher who'd been mangled to death in his own printing press. She could actually read passages from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* on his forehead. But Joan had never seen anything like the sight that waited for her in the laboratory.

The werewolf hadn't perished, as they'd thought. The creature was perched on one knee. The other knee was upright and the body of Professor Stevens was lying across it. Stevens's head was twisted unnaturally to one side, his eyes shut, his dead mouth hanging open. A great jagged gash ran from behind his left ear to his larynx. Blood pumped in ugly jets from around frayed muscle. Some of the blood spilled behind the cervical vertebrae; some of it gushed onto the professor's white shirt. Some of it had been lapped up by the Wolf Man; his thin, leathery lips and hairy chin were matted with blood and gore.

The werewolf looked up when she arrived. He stared at her and snarled, his eyes glowing with fierce contentment.

Joan fought down her nausea as she stood absolutely still. She didn't even breathe. The creature had already fed; perhaps it wouldn't attack her as

long as she remained calm. The young woman had no idea how much human intelligence the monster had and she didn't want to provoke him by making any sudden movements.

The Wolf Man cocked his head to one side and looked at Joan. The eyes, which had seemed so satisfied a moment before, suddenly changed. They became almost sorrowful. He put his large left hand over Stevens's face, dug his claws into the cheeks, chin, and forehead and placed the professor's head on the floor. He moved it carelessly, as though it were an overripe melon. Then, noticing Joan's horrified eyes, the werewolf glanced down at the dead man's face. When he looked back at her, he seemed almost ashamed.

Breathing again, Joan took a small step back. She had it in mind to move away slowly and shut the laboratory door. Her Gypsy blouse was heavy with sweat. It clung stubbornly to her arms and chest. Even the soles of her feet were damp.

The werewolf growled menacingly. Joan did not take a second step. The Wolf Man stood nearly straight, his hands held waist-high. Though his claws scratched the air slowly, Joan didn't get the feeling that he was going to attack. He reminded her of the springer spaniel she'd had as a child. Baby Ruth would sometimes rake the air when she was asleep. These were like the reflexive twitches of a creature in a trance. Even when the Wolf Man began padding toward her there was nothing threatening in his manner. Perhaps because the eyes had grown melancholy even the werewolf's bloody muzzle seemed tragic rather than grotesque.

As he approached, the Wolf Man turned his head to the side. He crouched slightly and bayed. When the cry ended, the werewolf drew a short breath and howled again. Only this time the sound was different. It resembled a human moan and it became more manlike with each moment. Then, as the first lemon-yellow light of dawn glinted off the broken glass in the window frame, the Wolf Man began to change. His powerful chest, arms, and thighs deflated slowly. His black snout smoothed and became less swarthy. He stood more erect and his hands dropped to his sides, the fingers limp. Most incredibly, the light brown fur began to disappear. It evaporated in layers, taking most of the splattered blood along with it. It retreated to the forehead, cheeks, and chin; then to the hairline and beard; and finally to the

jawline and ears. When it was gone, the eyes changed. Their sadness became the deepest despair Joan had ever seen.

The man who had been a wolf looked at her.

"Forgive me," he said in a deep, pitifully anguished voice. He looked at his hands and then tore them through his longish black hair. "God, forgive me!"

Joan swallowed hard. The sweat on her blouse cooled quickly as she tried to focus on the tall, brawny figure and not on the butchered remains of Professor Stevens.

And then it came to her. "I know you," she said.

The man lowered his hands and looked at her.

"You're the man who threatened Count Dracula at the masquerade party this evening," she said.

The forlorn eyes were suddenly alert. "Count Dracula! Where is he?"

"He's dead," Joan replied.

"I know that," said the man. "He's been dead for five centuries."

Joan stared at him. Despite everything she'd witnessed tonight, she wasn't prepared to go quite that far.

"Where is his body?" the man pressed.

"On its way to the Florida Keys, I would imagine. You and Count Dracula fell into the sea. If that *was* you, I mean."

"It was," he said. "But—is that all that happened to Dracula?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was anything else done to his body?"

"I don't understand."

The man touched his chest. "Was a stake driven through his heart? Was his body exposed to daylight?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

The man's look of pain deepened. "Then he may have survived," he said ominously. "Count Dracula can only be slain if his heart is destroyed. The heart that keeps his accursed body supplied with human blood. What of his companion, the Frankenstein Monster?"

“Professor Stevens—” she began, then stopped. Her eyes lowered, though she avoided looking at the corpse. “The late Professor Stevens set him afire on the wharf. His body fell into the sea.”

“Then the Monster, too, may still be undead.”

Undead, Joan thought. *Dead for centuries.* She was accustomed to absolutes like someone being cold dead on the train tracks. Stone dead in a barrel of carp. Dead as a doornail in the plates of a printing press. What this man was saying was unbelievable.

Yet so was the transformation she had just witnessed. And she *had* witnessed it. That hadn’t been a hallucination.

“I came from Europe to destroy Dracula and the Monster but I failed,” Talbot said with disgust. He half-turned toward the laboratory. “All I accomplished was killing more innocent people.”

The man fell silent. He did not attempt to introduce himself, nor did he ask anything about the man he’d just slaughtered. Except for his one shamed outburst, everything he’d said was about the monsters. His manner only added to the surrealness of what had transpired in here. Waves crashed in the distance. Somewhere off the Florida coast a foghorn sounded. They were Joan’s only contact with the familiar and she concentrated hard on them.

“Who are you?” Joan asked. “And what—what in God’s name did I just see happen to you?”

“You don’t know?” the man asked.

Joan shook her head.

“But you know about Count Dracula and the Monster.”

“Not very much,” she said. “And what I know and what I believe are two very different things.”

“Believe,” the man admonished. “You’ll live longer.”

The flat conviction in his voice startled her. He wasn’t like the liars and con artists she’d encountered over the years. He wasn’t trying to defend himself. He was trying to protect her.

The man started walking away from the body. As he circled around, Joan stole a quick look into the foyer—just to make sure she knew where the

front door was.

"Don't worry," the man said softly. "I'm not like the creature I become. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then why don't you just stay where you are and talk?"

"I wanted to get away from—from what I've done," he said. "So you wouldn't have to look at it."

Joan flushed. "Oh," she said. "I see. I'm sorry."

When the man stopped he was standing to her left, the same distance from her as he was before. He drew his shoulders back and bowed his head slighty. "My name is Lawrence Stewart Talbot. As for what happened to me —" He opened the top buttons of his shirt and exposed the left side of his chest. "Do you see this scar?"

Joan looked at his pale, beefy, hairless breast. There was a ruddy cross-hatching of scars over the heart. "I see it."

"That's the sign of the pentagram," said Talbot. "Six years ago I was bitten by a wolf. Only he wasn't an ordinary wolf. He was a werewolf, a man who becomes a wolf whenever the moon is full. Now there's a curse upon me. During every full moon *I* become a wolf. I'm forced to kill."

"Forced? By whom?"

"By some inner beast," Talbot said. "Yet killing my victims is a mercy."

Joan glanced at Professor Stevens then looked away with disgust.

"I know that sounds horrible," Talbot admitted. "But if I bite someone who doesn't die, then *they* become a werewolf."

"I see," she said. "Just like catching a cold."

"Please," Talbot said. "Don't make light of the curse, Miss Raymond."

"How did you know my name?"

"Professor Stevens told me. You're an insurance investigator. He and I were searching for you before the full moon caused my hideous transformation." He lowered his head. "I didn't want it to end this way. I'd hoped the two of you could get safely away before I changed. But my hopes don't matter." His voice began to rise. "You'd think I was the greatest sinner since Cain. But do you know the irony of it? When my older brother

John died in a hunting accident, I wasn't even there. *I had nothing to do with it!"*

Talbot's growing passion frightened Joan and she finally began backing away. She stepped into the towering entrance hall with its great spiral staircase and baroque furnishings. Though she had watched the man transform she didn't believe what she'd seen. He had to be insane. He wasn't bitten by a werewolf and Count Dracula wasn't a vampire. This man Talbot had to have willed the change in a way she didn't understand. Or maybe *she* was insane. Or delirious. Maybe she'd eaten spoiled pâté at the ball and was imagining all of this. Or perhaps this castle was the real McDougal's House of Horrors and no one had bothered to tell her. Her boss or McDougal or someone else was testing her. This was all a sinister joke.

Whatever it was, she had to get out of the house and back to civilization. The world was mad; it had just proved that in a second World War. But at least that was a madness she understood.

"Mr. Talbot," she said, "have you ever tried to get help? There are doctors, psychiatrists—"

"I've tried doctors!" Talbot lamented. He started walking toward her. "Dr. Mannering, Dr. Niemann, Dr. Edelmann. Some of the most revered and notorious scientists in Europe have attempted to cure me. Dr. Edelmann—he came close." Talbot smiled faintly. "I was so confident, so sure that he'd succeeded, I even married his assistant, Miliza. Poor, sweet Miliza. We had two beautiful months together before my brain rejected the surgery. Before I . . . I—" Talbot thrust his tortured face into his open palms. "The werewolf seeks to kill the one it loves. She's dead and Edelmann is dead and whatever he did to me died with him. They *all* tried to help with science or love and they all failed."

"There are sanitariums," Joan said softly.

"I've been caged and shackled and straitjacketed over and over!" Talbot said. He shook his fists violently. "I tell you, nothing can hold me. Nothing except—" Talbot looked at her.

"Except?" she prodded.

"Except death." A gentleness and an almost boyish anticipation suddenly came over him. "Miss Raymond, please don't back away. Don't be afraid."

“I’m not afraid,” she lied. But she stopped moving. She was standing in the center of the vast hall, just outside a sharp shaft of moonlight that shone through the open door. A cold breeze swept past her, stirring a tapestry that hung along the winding staircase to her right. The wind whistled up the stairs for a moment and then died. When it did, the front door squeaked on its hinges. It shut solidly, snapping off the moonlight. The hall was dark and quiet.

Talbot was standing in the laboratory doorway. His hulking form filled the door, dark and ominous against the lighted room.

“I want . . . I *need* your help,” Talbot said. His voice echoed through the hall.

“If you want to turn yourself in to the authorities,” Joan replied, “I’ll be happy to help.”

“No,” Talbot said emphatically. “That won’t do any good. I only want to die. I don’t want to live through another one of my spells. When I was back in London, I thought I could use my animal cunning for good by hunting down Count Dracula. I wanted to try to atone for all the suffering I’ve caused. That’s why I followed him here. But at best I’ve only delayed him. At worst I’ve strengthened his resolve.”

“You don’t know that Count Dracula has survived.”

“And you don’t know Count Dracula,” Talbot replied. “His coffin was probably hidden nearby. By now he’s had enough time to return to it. When the sun goes down he’ll move it. It will take me days or weeks or maybe even months to find him. And all the while, during every full moon, I’ll kill. Don’t you see, Miss Raymond? There’s no choice. I *must* be destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” she said. “You’re not a rabid dog—”

“I know that,” Talbot said sadly. “A rabid dog doesn’t wake up in the morning and wonder where he is or who he’s killed. A rabid dog can’t ask to die. A rabid dog can’t cry. I can, Miss Raymond. And I do.”

Joan could see the pain in his eyes. She forced herself to look at Professor Stevens. Just a few minutes before, the scientist had been alive—a man with a conscience, emotions, memories, and passion. Now he was raw meat already drawing flies. Whether Talbot was cursed or insane, he

was a killer. Perhaps he deserved death. But that wasn't for her to decide. And for some reason she felt sorry for him.

"In order to die," Talbot went on, "I need your help. A werewolf can only be destroyed by someone who feels passionately about him. Someone who wants him to die out of love or pity or even hate."

"No," Joan said. "I'm not a killer."

"Destroying me isn't murder," he insisted. "It's mercy to me and to those I might attack."

"But if love can kill you then maybe it can cure you," she said.

"I tell you it's been *tried!"*

"You're in America now, Mr. Talbot. I've visited clinics, modern facilities where there are many different ways of treating people. Things are different from how they are in Europe."

"Are they?" Talbot asked. "I lived with my mother in California for eighteen years. Do you know what will happen if I go to the police? The courts will say I'm insane. Psychiatrists and physicians will study me. They'll try to discover what causes the transformation."

"It's possible they will," said Joan. "And maybe they'll succeed. Maybe they'll find a cure."

Talbot shook his head. "I'll escape before that happens. I always do. After being deprived of a kill for just one night the will to attack becomes overpowering. I can bend metal bars, Miss Raymond. I can snap chains. Nothing can hold me. Besides, even if medical science were able to cure me, I dare not put the secret of my curse into anyone's hands."

"Why?"

Talbot walked toward her slowly. "Does the name Frank Griffin mean anything to you?"

Joan shook her head.

"His grandfather was Dr. Jack Griffin. Surely you've heard of him—the Invisible Man."

Joan began to wonder if she had slipped down the rabbit hole into Wonderland without realizing it. She raised her hands and waved them in

front of her. “Don’t,” she warned and began backing away again. “I’m leaving.”

“But you must listen—”

“No! Don’t try to tell me that he was real too!”

“But he was,” Talbot insisted, his voice calm. “Hear me out. When the military learned that Frank possessed his grandfather’s invisibility formula, they insisted that he use it to fight the Axis. He became the Invisible Agent. After four or five successful missions he was wounded by German spies in London. But before he was sent home, Allied doctors took samples of his blood. They used it to re-create the formula and turned other men invisible —”

“Stop it, Mr. Talbot!” Joan cried. “I don’t believe that there are squads of invisible spies and G.I.’s!”

“There are records,” he assured her. “Does your firm have contacts in London?”

“Yes—”

“Call them.” He pointed toward an old wooden desk to the right of the front door. “There’s a telephone, Miss Raymond. Get the long distance operator and call. Ask them about an American Army medic, Dr. Peter Drury, who was stationed in Cardiff. He worked with Griffin’s blood. He also came across my case in the files of the old Queen’s Hospital. That was the first place I’d gone to for help. Dr. Drury contacted me at my flat in London and I met with him. He said he wanted to try to cure me.” Talbot’s eyes grew moist and he looked down. He rubbed his hands together. “What he really wanted were samples of my blood for the military. He planned to make soldiers more ferocious and able to hunt at night.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Joan asked.

Talbot fired her a look. “What’s wrong—with spreading this curse?”

“If you are what you say you are, your affliction could have saved American lives on the battlefield.”

“To what end?” Talbot asked. “So that when they returned from the war they could endure night after night of torment, as I do? So they could butcher their wives and sweethearts? And what of the enemy soldiers they attacked? Those men would have become werewolves too.”

“Not if the doctors had been able to work with your blood, find a cure.”

“What if they couldn’t? What if other governments weren’t as charitable with *their* monster-soldiers? No, Miss Raymond,” Talbot said. “I couldn’t be a party to that. And I never will be. That’s why you must help me. My body must be destroyed or hidden. The curse of the werewolf must die with me.”

Joan stopped moving and Talbot stood where he was. Joan was just a few steps from the closed front door. Talbot was in the center of the hall. Standing in the middle of that enormous chamber, blanketed in darkness, he sounded very much alone. But Joan was neither a defeatist nor a coward. Even if what he was telling her was true, she wouldn’t help him flee his troubles . . . or the responsibility for his crimes.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Talbot,” she said, “but I can’t help you. I don’t know if I can live with helping a man kill himself.”

“Even a man who murders?”

“Yes, even a man who murders.”

“And yet,” Talbot said, “I vaguely remember watching you earlier. You didn’t stop Professor Stevens from destroying the Frankenstein Monster.”

“That was different,” she said. “You said it yourself, that poor creature was already dead. Every part of him, every cell. Besides, he was trying to kill those two baggage clerks.”

“Won’t anything I say convince you?”

“No,” she said. “I’ll help you seek counseling or medical care—that’s all.”

Talbot’s shoulders sunk. Joan couldn’t believe that she actually felt compassion for this man who had just torn away Professor Stevens’s throat and drank his blood.

But had it been this man? she asked herself.

Talbot sighed. “Perhaps I *am* asking too much of you,” he said. “You’ve been through so much tonight.” He walked over to one of the candelabra. There was a wooden match in a dish beside it. He used it to light the candles. “Maleva once told me that if I tried to take my own life, the wolf in me would resist. She said that if I tried to kill myself he would emerge and fight me.”

“Mr. Talbot, don’t talk like that.”

“Why not? It’s the only way I know of ending the curse.” He looked at the candelabrum and shook his head. “Brass,” he muttered. He began looking around the room.

“But there’s still hope!” Joan said.

“Hope? Miss Raymond—forgive me, but I can still taste Professor Stevens’s blood in the back of my throat!”

“He’s dead. You’re *alive—”*

“Only until I find something made of silver.”

That took her aback. “Silver?”

“Its purity will break the curse of my immortality,” Talbot said. “Anything will work. A silver cross, a silver-tipped cane”—Talbot’s eyes locked on something—“or that.”

Joan turned as Talbot ran to the right. He stopped by the wall where there was a long Louis XVI console table with more brass candlestick holders on either side. There was also a large mirror above it. Talbot looked into the mirror. He seemed startled by what he saw. He touched the deep lines along his nose, the loose flesh under his eyes, the creases and long scar on his forehead.

“Hope.” Talbot snickered. “Do you know, Miss Raymond, I’m only forty-seven years old. Evil ages a man.”

“You aren’t evil,” Joan said. “You’re afflicted.”

“There’s evil in all of us. This thing you call an affliction lets it come out.” He touched the glass. “Today I will find a way to kill that evil before anyone else can be killed . . . or cursed, as I am.”

A part of Joan understood the man’s self-pity. A part of her also found it weak and objectionable. And a part of her didn’t want Talbot to die for purely selfish reasons. Joan Raymond had spent her entire life solving mysteries. She had to know if what he’d told her was true. Because if his condition were supernatural rather than biological, it would be very difficult for her to go back to the real world, hunting down missing art, jewelry, and people.

“Mr. Talbot,” she said patiently, “you were in England during the war. Weren’t there times when the struggle against the Axis seemed hopeless?”

“There were.”

“But we pressed on. We found ways to win. We invented new weapons. I believe in hoping for the best, not the worst.”

“You’re young,” Talbot said. “When you’ve experienced what I have you become weary. You have to fight to hold on to hope.” With easy grace Talbot leaned toward the mirror and removed it from the wall. Dust flew from the frame and flickered as it caught the candlelight. Talbot raised the mirror above his head then stepped back and dropped it to the floor. Joan winced as the glass shattered in large chunks. Then Talbot lifted the frame and threw it aside. He bent and picked up a large, jagged piece of the mirror. He looked at it longingly.

“This should do.”

“Don’t,” Joan said. “Come with me. We’ll find help. And if that doesn’t work out *then* I’ll help you end your life.”

“It’s too late for that,” Talbot said. His eyes on the piece of glass, he dropped to his knees, turned the silvered side up, and placed the point against the pentagram on his chest. He put both hands around the glass then looked at Joan. “I ask only one thing. If you truly believe that I am not like the Frankenstein Monster or Count Dracula, tell that to people. Tell them that Lawrence Talbot had a conscience . . . that he was not entirely inhuman.”

“I do believe that,” Joan said as she looked at him. “Which is why it’s wrong to do what you’re doing.”

He looked over at her. “Thank you,” he said. As sad as his face appeared, it seemed more at peace right now than it had all night. “But the greater wrong is to keep on living.” He looked from the woman to his chest. As he pressed the point into his skin, his hands began to shake. His cheeks and jowls began to darken. “Oh, God!” he moaned. *“No!”*

“What is it?” Joan asked. But even as she asked she knew the answer. Talbot had said that the wolf would emerge if he tried to take his life.

“Help . . . me!” Talbot cried as his lips pulled back from his teeth. Thick spittle began to roll along his upper and lower teeth. His hands trembled

violently. “God . . . *help me!”*

Joan shook her head and stepped back. She bumped into the front door and watched as Talbot struggled to put the glass through his chest.

“Please!” Talbot wailed. “He’s *resisting*—trying to get out!”

“No! Whatever it is, you’ve got to fight it!”

Talbot’s nails began to grow. His nose seemed to tighten and grow darker. “Don’t you understand?” Talbot cried. *“I won’t be able to control him!* He’ll stop me and then he’ll hunt you down!”

Joan had always prided herself on being a woman of principle. An idealist, always choosing the right course over the convenient one. But she wasn’t foolish. Breathing deeply, she ran toward Talbot.

“God help us both,” she said as she knelt in front of him. Her face was directly in front of his. She could smell the inhuman breath coming from his mouth. “What do you want me to do?”

“Push!” he cried. “Just push!”

Joan extended her left hand toward the piece of glass. She wrapped her fingers around Talbot’s. She could literally feel the fingers becoming thicker, hair pushing from under the skin.

“Hurry!” Talbot implored her, his voice gruff and deepening.

Joan placed the heel of her right hand against the edge of the fragment. She saw his wrist thicken and short, bristlelike hair rise from it. This was not an illusion. It was proof of the existence of hell.

As her resolve grew stronger, Joan pressed more firmly against the smooth edge of the glass. It penetrated Talbot’s bare flesh. A trickle of blood spilled out as spittle dripped onto her hand.

“Do I need to put the glass—all the way through the pentagram?” Joan asked.

“As far as you can,” Talbot said. His woeful eyes found hers. The eyes were narrowing, the flesh around them darkening. “Quickly!” he urged.

She hesitated. Her fingers weakened and her grip relaxed. If there were a hell then there had to be a heaven. And one day she would be judged for this—

“I don’t think I can do this!” she cried.

“You must!” Talbot gurgled, his voice changing into a low rasp as he slipped one of his big hands from underneath hers. He placed it firmly behind Joan’s. She felt a strong push on the back of her hand and, surrendering, she went with it.

Talbot’s frown became a grimace as the sharp-edged glass penetrated his chest more deeply. Joan shut her mouth and breathed through her nose and pressed harder on the mirror. He moaned, a trace of the wolf still in his voice as the silver-backed shard slid between his ribs.

“More!” he pleaded as his blood spilled onto her dress.

“God, no—”

“The silver must penetrate . . . my heart.”

With a cry, Joan turned her face to the side and put both palms on the back of the shard. She leaned into his chest. Talbot sucked down air as the makeshift weapon found its target. He smiled, exhaled loudly, and then slumped forward.

“At last,” he gasped. “At last.”

Joan shrieked and pulled her hands away as blood poured over the back of the glass. She put her gory palms on the cold stone floor and scuttled away, watching as Talbot bent over further. His forearms hit the floor. Blood dripped into a puddle under his chest. She raised the back of one hand to her mouth and began to cry.

“Forgive me,” she said, as much to God as to Talbot.

“No,” Talbot said. “It’s . . . what . . . I’ve wanted.”

The candle threw off enough light so Joan could see Talbot’s face reflected in the spreading pool of blood. She wanted to go to him and comfort him. But it was all so horrible—

“Listen . . . carefully,” he wheezed. “My body . . . must not . . . be burned. It must be buried . . . in an unmarked place. And the mirror . . . must never be removed.” Talbot looked over at her. “Will you . . . see to it?”

“This can’t be happening!” she cried as his blood streamed toward her. It seemed almost as though the blood were alive, seeking her out. The wolf’s life essence determined to mark her for all time.

“Will you . . . see . . . to . . . it?”

Joan moved aside at the last moment. She was relieved as the thin stream of blood flowed past her.

"Yes," she cried. "I'll make sure no one finds you!"

"Thank . . . you," Talbot said. His torso drooped and his head struck the floor. He struggled briefly for breath. "I must never . . . live . . . again."

"Never," Joan repeated.

With a little smile and a final gasp, Lawrence Stewart Talbot shuddered and rolled onto his side.

Joan waited a long minute before crawling toward him. She felt as though she were in a Grand Guignol play, dressed in a costume, creeping through a gothic setting, going to examine a corpse. She bent over the body, lifted one of his wrists, and looked for a pulse. There wasn't any. Slipping the shawl from around her shoulders, Joan laid it over his head and stood. She felt guilty as she looked down at the peaceful body and then into the laboratory at the butchered remains of Professor Stevens. Stevens had come back to save her. Had he remained on the mainland, he'd still be alive. So why did she feel bad for Talbot and not for him? And why did she actually believe the most fantastic thing Talbot had said?

I must never live again.

How could he live again? He was dead. So were Professor Stevens and Dr. Mornay, though they were *truly* dead. Or were they? It was all too much to assimilate.

Joan didn't understand what she'd seen, and she still didn't believe she'd actually seen much of it. But Talbot had believed. And if nothing else, she had promised that no one would ever find his body. She would keep that promise.

Joan had heard enough lame alibis in the course of her career to be able to create better ones. She considered what she must do. She'd telephone the police and tell them that Professor Stevens had been murdered by a madman named Count Dracula. Dracula had also attacked Dr. Mornay before he left the island—left it in a motorboat, she suspected. She heard it leave. Maybe he'd set fire to the pier to try to prevent any other boats from pursuing. Lawrence Talbot? She had no idea what happened to him after their brief encounter at the ball. As for Chick Young and Wilbur Grey, if

they were foolish enough to tell what had really happened here, it would only legitimize her own story. No one would believe them.

Poor men, she thought. They really were innocent victims caught in the scheme of Count Dracula.

Young and Grey had said there was a basement in the castle. Joan began opening doors around the foyer until she found it. The torchlit wooden staircase led to a grotto, which had probably been constructed by the original Dr. Mornay to allow secret access to the sea. It was a clever and convenient way to dispose of failed experiments, Joan thought. As she walked cautiously down the steep stairs, looking for a place to conceal the body, she leaned on the moldy walls for support. At the first landing she nearly lost her balance as the wall turned inward. She gasped as it revealed a hidden chamber. She looked inside. There was a heavy wooden chair against one wall and a grate in the floor. A choking, sulfurous smell rose from the pit beneath the grate. Whatever unspeakable activities had taken place here, the room would serve only one purpose henceforth. It would provide Lawrence Talbot with a suitable tomb.

Returning to the foyer, Joan picked up her shawl, grabbed the shoulders of Talbot's shirt, and began pulling him across the smooth stones. His body left a long red smear in its wake. The young woman looked away. She knew she'd think of Talbot often after tonight, and she didn't want to think of him dead. She wanted to picture him savoring that moment of death—not happy, but at least at peace.

At the top of the steps, Joan picked him up under the arms and backed down ahead of him. She wanted to lend some measure of dignity to his final descent. Upon reaching the secret room, she lay him on his back on the cold, damp floor. After wiping her bloody hands on her shawl, she closed the revolving section of wall. Then she looked back at the wall and touched it.

She thought of the race she'd been running for seven years. The race to build a career. Pretending to be someone's daughter or secretary or long-lost relative or, most recently, Wilbur Grey's lover. Then she thought of the race Lawrence Talbot had run. Pursuing Count Dracula around the world. The depression brought on by his failure. The passion he harbored for his own destruction and the pleasure he experienced when he succeeded. Her own

goals and achievements seemed mundane by comparison. Though Joan had not known Lawrence Talbot before this evening, and she had not known him for very long, she knew that the encounter would change her life.

Slowly, she walked back up the damp, slippery stairs. She used her shawl to wipe Talbot's blood from the floor. When she was finished, she took a poker from the fireplace and stuck it through the garment. She walked over to the basement, threw the poker into the water, and shut the door. Then she sat at the wooden writing desk, picked up the telephone, and asked the operator to connect her with the LaMirada sheriff's office.

She told him who she was. She told him where she was and what had just happened—more or less. The sheriff asked Joan if she were in any immediate danger. She said no, she didn't believe so. He told her that a patrol boat would be over within a half hour and she should stay where she was.

Joan hung up and looked around the sunlit foyer. The light dispelled the horrors without destroying the history and character of the room.

Stay where you are.

Despite everything that had happened, Joan smiled. That seemed like a very good idea indeed.

V

With the advent of the automobile, the tiny fishing village of LaMirada, Florida, had become the sandbox of the well-to-do. Mansions rose and tennis courts sprouted beside the Gulf beaches, and recreational tans joined the leathery bronze of longtime locals. The sheriff acquired a deputy. The main street got a traffic island. The mayor was given an office, a secretary, and a raise when he was forced to spend less and less time managing his general store.

When the train station opened in LaMirada in 1922, the village became a weekend haunt of the middle class. By the 1940s, a tiny airfield had been built just north of the marshes and travel agents in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington made LaMirada one of the hottest resorts on Florida's west coast. Republican presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey stopped in the town during the 1944 campaign.

By 1950, LaMirada was nearly a ghost town.

To hear some people tell it, LaMirada was literally a ghost town. Spirits were said to roam the grounds of an abandoned military research facility. Disembodied laughter was heard in the streets and in movie theaters, lighted cigarettes floated along beaches and roads, and food rose from tables in homes and restaurants and disappeared, bite by bite. Some crackpots said the specters belonged to ancient Spanish settlers who had colonized the region. Among those local eccentrics, the lunatic fringe said they were the result of "invisible soldier" experiments conducted at the local military facility during the war.

But the ghosts were not entirely responsible for the near death of LaMirada. They were merely a curiosity and a nuisance. The real town-killer was a shadowy figure known as the Beast of LaMirada.

The Beast first appeared almost a month to the day after the strange events reported on La Viuda, a rock of an island located just off the Florida coast. Two shipping clerks, Chick Young and Wilbur Grey, returned from Mornay Castle on La Viuda with tales of having encountered a vampire

they called Count Dracula, a werewolf called Talbot, the legendary Frankenstein Monster, and even the Invisible Man. No trace of these creatures was ever found, though authorities were never able to question Young and Grey. The men left their LaMirada hotel room the day they returned. Some people said they assumed aliases and went to Mexico; others claimed they went to Africa; some maintained they'd joined the Foreign Legion. Whatever the truth, they never returned to LaMirada.

Authorities also weren't able to question Dr. Sandra Mornay, owner of the castle. Her smashed body was found beside a curtain wall, in the shadows. She was dressed in a lab coat and surgical cap. Apparently, she'd been thrown from the window of the castle laboratory. Given the reputation of her ancestors, villagers could only speculate as to what godless work she'd been up to. Mornay's assistant, Professor Charles Stevens, was also dead. His jugular vein had been severed and half the blood in his body had been drained. The only eyewitness to his murder, insurance investigator Joan Raymond, said that the young scientist had been slain by the mysterious Count Dracula. Though she insisted that Dracula was a madman and not a vampire, she could not explain the missing quantities of blood. Miss Raymond also said that she thought she heard Dracula and Dr. Mornay struggling in the laboratory. They had also argued at the castle before the masquerade party. Perhaps they were lovers, she suggested. Perhaps they were expatriate Nazi spies. Whatever the truth was, it vanished with Count Dracula and died with Dr. Mornay. The scientist was buried in the neglected garden behind the home of her ancestors.

It wasn't Miss Raymond's calm truths but the wild claims of Young and Grey that marked the beginning of the end of LaMirada. Newspapers from Naples to Miami carried the story that a vampire was prowling the coast. Reporters, curiosity seekers, and even hunters descended on the region, overtaxing its resources for nearly a month during the summer peak and chasing away regulars. When no vampire was found and the fad ended, many of those regulars did not return.

Miss Raymond did return, however. Following a brief vacation she resigned from her job with Shippers Insurance. Because Dr. Mornay had died intestate, Mornay Castle was auctioned by the state. Using her savings and a small inheritance she shared with her sister, Joan Raymond bought

the castle and moved in alone. She donated the laboratory equipment to New York University, hired workers to seal off the basement, and renamed the castle the Tombs. Except for brief weekly visits to the mainland, she kept entirely to herself.

The Beast made his first appearance a few days after Miss Raymond took title of the castle. A couple of never-say-die occult researchers from North Carolina's Duke University still hunting for Count Dracula were brutally murdered during a storm in a little-traveled region of Big Cypress Swamp. Their jugular veins had been attacked and their blood half-drained, just like Professor Stevens—though there was a difference. Whereas the wounds on Professor Stevens's throat had been what the Collier County coroner described as "neat slashes," the wounds on the two new bodies were "savage lacerations."

There was another brutal murder the next night. A young waitress was attacked while she was walking to her apartment after ten p.m., when her shift had ended. This time, however, there was a witness: a police officer, who wrote in his report that he'd heard a cry like a dog baying and saw "a shaggy man-like beast rushing away from the scene." The veteran officer said that he fired two shots at the retreating figure and was sure that he'd hit him at least once. But there was no blood at the scene save for that of the poor girl, and the search for the "beast" turned up nothing. The only pedestrian in the vicinity, James Karl McDougal, owner of McDougal's House of Horrors, gruffly claimed to have seen and heard nothing. When the police officer asked the normally resplendent entrepreneur what he was doing out with his shirt unbuttoned to the navel and his feet bare, he snapped, "Coming back from the beach, you moron!" Since the night of the masquerade, when he was attacked by a wolf, less-than-discreet associates reported that Mr. McDougal had been even surlier than usual.

Because the murders began when Miss Raymond returned, county Police Inspector Wellman went to query her about them. Where was she on the night of the first attacks? Island-bound because of heavy rains, she said. Where was she the night of the second murder? Repairing the storm-damage to her tiny launch. Did Inspector Wellman wish to see the boat? He did, and was satisfied that she was telling the truth. However, Miss Raymond did speculate that the killings sounded very much like the work

of a werewolf. Why did she say that? asked Wellman. Miss Raymond only smiled and suggested that he arm himself with silver bullets. The inspector did not visit La Viuda again.

Despite the best efforts of local and state police to catch the Beast, the killings continued for years. The few loyalists who returned to LaMirada the following summer did not come back the summer after. By 1951 the permanent population had dwindled from 3,500 to 500. By the following year it had dropped to 375. The tenacious McDougal closed his once-popular House of Horrors and moved to Tibet. Though the murders stopped then, it was too late to save LaMirada. For a while, the town council toyed with the idea of turning the House of Horrors into a maritime museum. The murderous Vesta Cove was located off a precipice near the McDougal property; the wreckage of many a ship was still strewn across the rocky, difficult-to-negotiate shoals below. But the families of sailors who had died there did not want the site disturbed, so the museum building sat and LaMirada inched a little closer to death. Even the curiosity-seekers stopped coming in 1955 when the famed Gill-Man, who had been captured in the Amazon, escaped from Ocean Harbor Park. For a year after that, everyone who wanted to hunt for a monster went to the Everglades, where the creature had been spotted.

Decades passed. And then, on one moonless night, the population of LaMirada decreased by one more.

ONE

The Present

"Ms. Raymond was a very private woman," attorney Henry Pratt said as he guided the compact express cruiser through mirror-smooth gulf waters. He had to speak loudly to be heard over the slap of the waves and the rush of the wind. "Your great-aunt was a wonderful writer and a grand old woman. But she was very, very difficult to get to know."

The late afternoon sky was rich blue and remarkably clear, the warm air invigorating. And the young blond woman sitting beside him in the open cockpit was an exhilarating change from the crusty fishermen and fourth-generation old money families with whom the attorney usually dealt. He prayed that Caroline Cooke would decide to move here from Atlanta.

"You say that as if privacy were a bad thing," the woman said. "Given my great-aunt's profession, I'd think that a little aloofness would add to her mystique, to the appeal of her stories."

"Oh, it did," Pratt said. "But she had a sharp mind and a great imagination, not to mention an extraordinary talent. I'd have liked to have gotten to know the woman behind that a little better."

"I understand," his passenger replied in a flute-clear voice. The young woman was subdued but not morose. Even during the funeral on the island she'd been quiet but not gloomy. And she'd been very, very gracious with those who'd come to pay their respects to LaMirada's most famous citizen.

"Not that your great-aunt was impolite or unthoughtful," Pratt went on. God, he didn't want to create the impression that he was critical. "To the contrary. Joan Raymond was the first person in town to hire me when I graduated from law school. She never had a literary agent—"

“Yes, I know.”

“—and she trusted me to renegotiate her old contracts as well as negotiate the new ones. She never failed to enquire about my father and mother, or about the health of whoever was ailing in town. But she very rarely talked about her own life.”

Caroline said nothing. Worried that he might be talking too much, trying too hard to make the young woman feel at ease, Pratt shut up. He stole another look at the slender beauty as she pushed windblown locks of blond hair from her face and hooked them behind her ear. Her hazel eyes were clear and her white skin seemed even paler because of the black suit she was wearing. Even in mourning she looked lovely. Winsome and lovely.

They rounded the headland and the island of La Viuda loomed suddenly. The castle seemed to grow from the low, craggy peak in the center. As always, it presented a forbidding silhouette against the sky. It was as if the dark stones of the Tombs were unable to reflect sunlight. Pratt reduced their speed. This time out, Pratt wanted Caroline to be able to enjoy the view. Earlier in the day he’d had to run the young woman and her parents out here, then take Caroline back to his office to review her great-aunt’s will. Joan Raymond had left her great-niece everything, and he wanted to make sure she had an overview of what that entailed—property, copyrights, bank accounts. There were royalty statements and investments they would have to deal with before the week was out. There were also unpublished manuscripts at the Tombs. Caroline had listened politely and attentively. She seemed like a woman who took responsibility seriously.

“I don’t think my great-aunt felt that she knew herself very well,” Caroline said at last. “She once wrote to me saying there were a great many things she needed to understand about her own life and the world in general. She said that writing was her way of exploring them.”

“When you put it that way, I guess one can’t blame Ms. Raymond for keeping to herself,” Pratt said. “Some of what happened to her on that island was pretty weird. I assume you know about its history.”

“Not much,” Caroline said. “My mother told me a little about it when I was a child. Something about a murder?”

“That’s putting it delicately,” Pratt said.

Caroline looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” Pratt said, “now that I think about it, I’m not sure we should be discussing this right now.”

“Why?” she asked. “Because of the funeral?”

“I suppose so,” he said. “I don’t know. I just think death isn’t an appropriate subject right now.”

“When is it, Mr. Pratt?” Caroline said. “Besides, what better way is there to honor my great-aunt than by telling me about her past? Talk to me.”

Pratt looked at her. “You really want to know, don’t you?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

Pratt nodded. In that respect at least, the young woman was just like her aunt. She spoke her mind.

“To put it bluntly,” Pratt said, “a scientist, Professor Stevens, had his throat torn out. Though Ms. Raymond denied it, others who were there that night insisted the killer was a real, honest-to-God vampire or a werewolf.”

“You’re kidding,” Caroline said.

Pratt shook his head. “Today most of the people in town laugh at the stories. State Trooper Willis—you met him at the funeral—actually gets angry when he hears them. Says they turned the town into a joke and killed its future as the coast’s biggest resort. But a few people, like Stephen Banning, Jr., whom you’ll meet in a few minutes, believe the stories religiously. Or irreligiously, as the case may be.”

Pratt chuckled then stopped. Caroline hadn’t even smiled at his bon mot. This lady was a serious one.

“What’s odd,” Pratt continued, “is that the few times the subject came up over the years—brought up by my own none-too-subtle prodding, I confess—I got the impression that your aunt believed the monster stories.”

“As we both know, my great-aunt had quite an imagination,” Caroline said. “My grandmother Arabella—my great-aunt’s sister—told me that when Aunt Joan worked as an insurance investigator, she was always assuming aliases and wearing disguises to get information. Granny Bella said Aunt Joan loved to pretend.”

“I’m sure she did,” Pratt said. “But many people think there really may have been something to the monster stories.”

“Including you?” She smiled for the first time.

Pratt blushed—not just from the accuracy of the statement but from the woman’s cheek-splitting smile.

“My grandfather was the county police inspector during the 1940s,” he said. “He showed me the report he filed. The police checked dental records throughout Florida going back five years. They never found anyone whose teeth-marks matched those in the dead man’s throat.”

“The killer could have been a transient.”

“The authorities considered that possibility,” Pratt said. “But the F.B.I. files showed no other crimes to match this one. None. They also could never account for the dead man’s missing blood.”

“Missing? As in spilled?”

“As in gone,” Pratt said. “Nearly half the blood in the professor’s body vanished. Whatever Ms. Raymond saw or heard or suspected, it obviously had an effect on her. So, I’m sure, did the legendary Beast of LaMirada.”

“I’ve never heard of that one,” Caroline said.

“I’ll give you the PG-13 version,” Pratt said. “The Beast was a serial killer who murdered over twenty LaMiradans during a two-year period in the early 1950s. Supposedly, he had long hair all over his body, hooked claws, and fangs the size of steak knives.”

“What happened to him?”

“No one’s sure,” Pratt said. “He simply vanished. But there are a lot of places around here where a body could get lost and never found. Each morning, real early, I help my grandfather take a constitutional around the swamplands near his home. The ones south of the airport. He keeps hoping that if the Beast’s out there the mud’ll give him back one day. Like prehistoric squirrels bubbling up from the La Brea tar pits in Los Angeles.”

“Doesn’t sound like the kind of thing you’d want back.”

“No,” Pratt agreed. “But it is one of those unexplained mysteries we’d all love to have solved.”

“Maybe it was the power of suggestion,” Caroline said. “If a couple of people believe something strongly enough they can always convince others. Like conspiracies and miracles—that sort of thing.”

“You may be right,” Pratt agreed. “Then again, *something* happened to make those few people believe strongly enough.”

As he turned the boat toward the shore of La Viuda, Pratt snuck another look at the young woman. He could see why she was a successful pediatrician. That musical voice of hers would charm even sick kids. And at the end of a smile, those dimples were becoming damn near irresistible.

“Ms. Raymond obviously did have a vivid imagination,” Pratt continued, “but she didn’t start writing until the early 1960s, long after the Beast killings had stopped. I’m convinced that her earliest stories were inspired by the events that occurred at the castle the night of the murder, enhanced by the Beast stories. She dropped hints over the years that the first story of the Werewolf of England saga was inspired by a man she once knew.”

“The Wails of Wales,” Caroline said with a spooky voice.

“A bona fide horror classic,” said Pratt. “She said the acronym ‘WOE’ was a coincidence, but I never believed her.”

“That was the first one of my great-aunt’s stories I read. It was in her collection *Lost in Wonderland.* I was eight years old when I stole the copy from my parents’ room and hid it under my pillow. It was also the last of her stories that I read. I slept with the light on for two days after that.”

“Did you?” Pratt said. “Of all her stories I thought that one was the gentlest. She made the Werewolf a very sympathetic character.”

“One who happened to rip open human jugular veins and drink human blood,” Caroline said. She shuddered. “I can still see the first kill she described. The one in the university laboratory when the Werewolf had the scientist bent over his knee and lapped up his blood as it spilled from the wound. It was very vivid—very realistic.”

“Your great-aunt had a rare talent for making readers believe the incredible,” Pratt said. He throttled down the engine as they approached the dock. “From the time I was a kid I devoured her stories. The Werewolf series, the Incan Mummy novels, her stories about the Brides of Nosferatu and her *Journal of Dr. Frankenstein.* I envy the box of unpublished stories

she left you and, to tell you the truth, I'd be honored if you let me read them sometime . . . But most of all," he said, his voice choking, "I'm going to miss your aunt. I truly am."

"I envy you the time you spent with her," Caroline said.

"You didn't get to see her much, did you?" Pratt asked.

"We were only together about six or seven times, usually at funerals and weddings and on one Christmas. But I wrote to her regularly, telling her what I was doing, and she always wrote back these long and interesting letters about books she'd read or reflections on life and death." Caroline looked out at the island. "I kept meaning to get down here, you know? But I had my practice to run and I was always filling in for other doctors. And then one day it's too late."

"That's always the way it is," Pratt said.

The attorney steered the boat next to the small dock, which Ms. Raymond had had built to replace the one that had been destroyed in a fire. Another vessel was already there, an old wooden fishing boat with a badly faded BANNING AND SON, MASONRY AND RESTORATIONS painted on the side. Prior to Pratt's return to LaMirada and his taking over Ms. Raymond's increasingly complex financial and legal affairs, she hadn't needed a dock. She was the only one who came and went. When she did, she rowed the quarter mile to shore and back for exercise and simply pulled her boat onto the shore when she returned.

The attorney stepped onto the dock and secured the gleaming white cruiser. Then he helped Caroline out.

"My god," she said, staring openmouthed at the tall, dark tower and the surrounding battlements. "You don't get this view from the other side of the island."

"No, you don't," Pratt agreed. "As I understand it, the man who built the castle put the cemetery on the other side of La Viuda to take advantage of the cove there."

"Take advantage?" Caroline asked, still staring up. "In what way?"

"Legend has it that in the old days some pretty curious medical experiments used to take place here."

"I see," Caroline said. "And that was where they hid the failures."

“So the story goes.”

“It’s a fascinating story. Look up at the tower,” she said, pointing. “See that black charring around the vents on the cupola?”

Pratt shielded his eyes and squinted up. “Vaguely.”

“Those are electrical burns,” she said. “I’ve treated several such burns over the years—they leave a very distinctive, sharp-edged flash-pattern. Someone was generating very high voltage here and letting it rip.”

“To what end?”

“I couldn’t begin to guess,” Caroline said. “But it’s no wonder people on the mainland were spooked. It must have looked like bottled lightning to them. Frightening and irresistible.”

Pratt smiled. “When your great-aunt made out her will last year she told me she wanted the castle to go to someone who would appreciate it. It appears it has.” He continued to stare at the tower. This wasn’t going to be easy. “She also wanted someone who would respect her wishes.”

“About the basement, you mean.”

“Yes, about the basement.” Pratt glanced over at the woman. Her striking resemblance to her great-aunt suddenly filled him with guilt. He was glad it was the new owner he had to hoodwink and not Ms. Raymond. This was bad enough, but that would have killed him. Pratt unzipped the front of his windbreaker. He looked away, gazing into the light of the sinking sun. “Dr. Cooke—Caroline—before we go in, there’s one thing we have to discuss.”

She turned to him.

“I told you that Steve Banning, Jr., would be meeting us here regarding a construction matter.”

“Yes,” she said. “Something about renovation work on the basement wall. What about it?”

“Well, it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“In what way?”

“Banning is here with Mr. Porterhouse of the Collier County Tax Assessor’s Office. The CTA is insisting that we have that section of the castle looked at as part of the probate procedure.”

“Looked at?”

Pratt exhaled sharply. “There’s a doorway that’s been bricked up. It has to be opened, Dr. Cooke.”

“I see,” she said. “I assume Aunt Joan was okay with that?”

Pratt turned and faced her. She seemed so vulnerable and trusting. He wished that he were somewhere else. “The truth is, I didn’t tell her.”

Caroline was no longer smiling. “Excuse me?”

“I couldn’t,” Pratt said, “and I hope you’ll try to understand. Ms. Raymond had a fixation with that part of the castle. The only time she ever raised her voice or shut the door on a subject was when the basement was brought up. Whether I was recommending that she let an exterminator down there or someone to check the integrity of the foundation or insulate the damn place she dismissed the idea before I was able to finish. If I’d said anything about the probate laws she would have insisted that the CTA has no right to go down there.”

“And who says they do?” she asked angrily.

“The State of Florida,” Pratt assured her. “I went to the county court the day after she drew up her will and tried to get her an exemption. I went again the day your aunt passed away.” He reached into the pocket of his wind-breaker and withdrew an envelope. He held it toward Caroline. “New administration—same answer. They turned me down.”

Caroline did not take the envelope. “You lied to her.”

“No—”

“You told her everything would be okay, when you knew otherwise. What do *you* call that?”

“Kindness,” he said. “I could never have lied to Ms. Raymond.”

“That’s a lawyer’s distinction,” Caroline snapped. “It’s bullshit.”

“I’m sorry,” Pratt said. “If the taxable assets of an estate exceed a certain amount, the federal government wants its share. I tried to beat this and I couldn’t. So I tried to protect her as best I could in the only way I knew how.”

“She wasn’t a child,” said Caroline. “She could have handled the truth.”

“I don’t think so,” Pratt replied. “When it came to that room she couldn’t have handled anything. I didn’t see any point in upsetting her.”

“You said you tried everything,” Caroline said. “What about a compromise? We’ll make an estimate. I’d be willing to settle on a reasonable figure, even if we get screwed.”

“I offered to have the matter arbitrated, Dr. Cooke. Unfortunately, when you do that they think you’re trying to hide something. And given the history of this place, I didn’t want to get the CTA *and* other bureaus involved. Don’t forget, there are still mysteries and unsolved crimes on the books. The state police, the F.B.I.—either of them could have forced us to open the room if they thought Ms. Raymond was concealing evidence.”

“Oh, please,” Caroline said. “My aunt the killer.”

“No,” Pratt said. “But like I said, not everybody thought she made up all the events in her fiction. I didn’t want to do anything that would fan old fears or start new ones—not while she was alive. The bottom line is, there’s no way I can keep the tax office from checking the place top to bottom.”

“I don’t believe that,” Caroline said. “There’s always a way to get what you want.”

“Not with Uncle Sam. I looked for records, floor plans, anything to show the CTA what was down there. On my own time, mind you, not Ms. Raymond’s. But even your great-aunt didn’t know where those documents were. I could have filed forms and spent Ms. Raymond’s money and delayed things maybe six months, maybe even a year. Searched for blueprints. But eventually they’d have gotten in. And knowing Mr. Porterhouse, because of the delay he’d have gone looking for small print in some tax law somewhere which would have entitled the government to monies, interest, and penalties going back to 1884 when the place was built. That could have cost the estate everything. Even if the basement is just empty space, the square footage adds to the value of the estate.”

“The value!” Caroline scoffed. “My mother told me that when the castle was auctioned in 1948 my great-aunt was the only bidder. Nobody wanted the goddamned place!”

“The government doesn’t care!” Pratt said. He stepped closer to her and put his hands on her arms. She shrugged them off. “Look, I understand your disappointment in the situation—and in me.”

“Disappointment isn’t the word.”

“Fine,” Pratt said. “Think what you want. But there’s nothing I could have done about any of it. I feel as violated by this as you do. But they would have gone in with or without us. At least if we’re here, we can make certain they do this with a minimum of inconvenience and as much respect as possible for Ms. Raymond’s wishes. Steve Banning is a good man. He’ll open the basement up and as soon as Porterhouse has had a chance to poke his head in we’ll close it again, no harm done.”

“Except the betrayal of Aunt Joan’s trust.”

“That’s right,” Pratt said. “And I’ll feel sick enough about that without you holding a serious grudge. Look, I didn’t return to LaMirada to make money. I came back because I love the town and I love its people. I loved your great-aunt most of all. I would never have done anything to hurt Ms. Raymond, and I did everything I could to try and spare her feelings. I succeeded in that but I couldn’t prevent the rest. It happens sometimes, and there’s nothing you can do but roll with the blow.”

The young woman looked down. She shook her head. “This is a sick joke. My great-aunt wills me her home and a trust fund and the first thing I have to do is let someone punch holes in both of them. Talk about vampires.”

“I’m the one who’s letting this happen, not you,” Pratt said. “You don’t take title of the Tombs until the deed is transferred and it can’t be transferred without the assessment.”

“Another lawyerly distinction.” Caroline sighed heavily. “I thought this place would be a retreat from the world. A haven from unpleasant realities. I guess not.”

Pratt hurt for her. Having to deal with dashed dreams, let alone the notion of her aunt scowling in the afterlife, were the last things she needed right now. He stepped toward Caroline and took her arms again. This time the young woman didn’t wriggle away.

“Your great-aunt made me her executor because she trusted me,” Pratt said. “I’m asking you to do the same. If Mr. Porterhouse sets so much as a toe outside the law, I’ll step on it. I promise.”

Caroline took a deep breath. “You did love my great-aunt, didn’t you?”

“As though she were my very own blood.”

“And when we’re finished here, we’re going to restore everything so that it’s just as my aunt left it?”

“I had Mr. Banning cannibalize an old wall outside of town so we could use the same year, same make of bricks that are there now.”

“All right, Mr. Pratt. We’ll do this your way. I know this is difficult for you and I’m sorry I made it worse.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Pratt said. “We were both looking out for a great lady in our own way.” He glanced up the winding stone path, which wound through a long stretch of gnarled trees. The ancient trunks and branches seemed as black as the castle, the limbs tightly interwoven. Beneath their canopy, day seemed to become night. Pratt turned toward the sun as it dipped toward the sea. “I suggest we get inside. I told them not to go in until we got there, and Steve is a veteran LaMiradan.”

“Meaning?”

“Like many natives, he’s a hard-core believer. He gets seriously creeped out if he’s in the field after dark.” Pratt winked. “That’s why I wanted to return to the mainland after the funeral and do this late in the day. Gives them less time to muck around in there.”

“I see,” Caroline said. Still smiling, she gave Pratt’s hand a little thank-you squeeze. Then they strode along the dock to the island.

Pratt felt a little shiver himself as he walked toward the castle. It became a deep and tenacious chill as he passed under the interlocked tree branches. Though he’d walked this way many times before, this was the first time he ever felt uneasy. Without Joan Raymond the Tombs was no longer a Caliban with a soul.

It was ominous . . . and becoming more so the closer he came.

TWO

His black Confederate cap pulled snugly on his head, his long face creased with aged lines and fresh worry, elderly Stephen Banning, Jr., hobbled toward Pratt and Caroline. He was slightly bowlegged and dressed in overalls that were baggy with tools that rattled as he walked.

Behind him was a short, portly man. He did not move from the front stoop. He wore a white suit, a sunburned head, a pencil moustache, sunglasses, and a sullen expression. He held an old Bolsey 35mm camera in his right hand and a flashlight in his left. Beside him, half-hidden behind a bush, were a small gas-powered jackhammer, a small stack of weather-worn bricks, and a bucket of newly prepared mortar.

Banning glared at Pratt as the newcomers neared the castle. "What'd you two do, dog-paddle?"

"We took the scenic route, around the headland," Pratt said.

"That was inconsiderate," Banning complained.

"Not to Dr. Cooke," Pratt replied.

"To me," Banning said dismissively. "But then, all you kids are spoiled. You and your boat. Tom Stevenson and his airplane, Kitty O'Neill and her horses downwind of my house. The rest of the world be damned. We been waiting here a goddamned hour." He looked at the woman for the first time and tipped his hat to her. "Excuse my Spanish, Ms. Cooke. And my sympathy about yer great-aunt. I'm sorry I wasn't here. I, uh—I don't come to funerals at the Tombs. It's against my religion."

"It's *Doctor* Cooke," Pratt corrected him.

"Huh?"

“It’s Caroline,” she replied pleasantly, “and thank you for your condolences.” She looked at the turret, which towered nearly one hundred feet above them. “I think I’m in love, Mr. Pratt.”

“Huh?” Banning said again.

“The castle was built with love, artistry, and pride,” Pratt said. “This really is some place.”

“Oh, sure,” Banning said. “And it’s someplace I don’t want to be at one second longer than I have to. An’ certainly not after dark.”

“Mr. Pratt tells me that you believe the legends of LaMirada,” Caroline said.

“Devoutly, with sugar on top. With all kinds of respect to your dear late auntie, I seen her books in the stores. She took to nightmares like most people take to warm milk before bed. Maybe you do too. I hope so, seein’ as how this place’s yers now. But the rest of us, miss—we ain’t like that.”

“How well did *you* know my great-aunt?” Caroline asked.

“Not too,” Banning said. He looked anxiously at his mortar-flecked watch. “We only said howdy and see ya when we bumped into each other on the mainland. But my son knew her pretty well. She’d come to the gen’ral store and buy food and toiletries . . . and also a lot of garlic and the occasional crucifix. Like she was expecting some unpleasant company, which maybe she was. Who the heck knows?”

“I’m told that my great-aunt was very religious. That would explain the cross. And maybe she just liked to cook with garlic.”

“Sure, an’ maybe she sprinkled the garden with holy water ’cause it made the hyacinths grow better. But she did it. Told me so herself, after my mechanic, Tim Sullivan, saw her with his very own binoculars.”

Pratt leaned toward Caroline. “I have to admit, Dr. Cooke, your great-aunt *was* a little eccentric where those artifacts were concerned.”

The young woman looked at him curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Mind you, I’m not judging her,” Pratt was quick to assure her. “I’m only telling you what I saw. She covered her bedroom walls with the crosses and hung garlic on every window and door. She never wanted to discuss it, but I think it had to do with what we were talking about before. That she really

did believe in all that—that *business*. You'll see for yourself. The room is exactly as your great-aunt left it."

"See?" Banning crowed. "I won't see, so don't bother inviting me up there."

"Aunt Joan wrote about and read about the supernatural. Maybe that made her religious, not superstitious. Anyway, all artists have their quirks."

"So do builders," Banning said, "an' mine is to always finish workin' on crypts, belfries, and castles before nightfall." He glanced back at the Tombs. "Whenever I come here I feel like something's gonna bite my ass." He turned and tipped his hat again. "Forgive my Spanish. But if you all don't mind I'd like t'get in and get out and get back to my little horse-smelly red shack A-S-A-P."

"No, Mr. Banning, we don't mind," Caroline said.

"Thank you," Banning said, extending his arm ahead of him. Caroline walked up the path, followed by the attorney and Mr. Banning. As they climbed the winding course, Banning reached into the pocket of his windbreaker. He pulled out a key ring, which held a silver St. Christopher medal, and swung it around.

Pratt nodded at the heavyset man. "Hello, William."

"Henry," Porterhouse replied. He looked at his watch. "My time is important too. We've been here almost an hour."

"I know, William, and I'm sorry. We had paperwork that couldn't wait."

"And a little guided tour."

"That's right," said Pratt. "A courtesy to our guest."

"Of course." Porterhouse sniffed. "Not any kind of a stalling tactic."

"William, you're the one who's standing around talking," Pratt said. "Shall we go inside?"

Porterhouse nodded. He regarded Caroline. "Ma'am," he said, nodding his bare head. "I'm sorry about your loss."

"Thank you," she replied, matching Porterhouse's reserve.

Pratt shook his head as he put the key in the door. "Gentlemen, your warmth is truly overwhelming."

"Whaddya mean?" Banning demanded.

“This is not the way to welcome a potential new neighbor. ‘Your house may be haunted, your late aunt was a little batty, and by the way—you’re wasting my precious time.’ ”

“Hey, I don’t need a lecture about courtesy from no snotty-nosed shyster,” Banning said with a snort.

“Come on, Stephen,” Porterhouse said. “We’re wasting time.”

“Yeah, an’ a little more ain’t gonna matter,” Banning said. “I’ll tell you something else, Pratt junior. I don’t need t’be in anybody’s face, especially a grieving lady. I welcome people with a ‘How ya doin’?’ an’ I mean it. Anything more than that is airs. An’ if they ask me a question, which this lady did, I give ’em a truthful answer.” He glared at Pratt. “Not everybody needs to lie for a living.”

“Thanks for the life-advice,” Pratt said. “Are you finished?”

“Lest you tick me off again,” Banning replied.

Pratt shook his head and turned the key. There was a heavy *thunk* as the bolt drew back.

Banning fell into a brooding silence. He came out of it long enough to shudder. “Tellin’ the truth is still the bottom line with me,” Banning said. “An’ the truth is, Dr. Cooke, I’d rather be just about anywhere else on earth than at this castle. I managed to set foot in here just once in my whole life—to wall up what I’m about to un-wall and then re-wall.”

Caroline looked at the mason. “Wait a minute. You saw what was in there?”

Banning nodded. “Just basement, Dr. Cooke. A lot of it, with water at the bottom.”

Caroline turned to the attorney. “Mr. Pratt, if Mr. Banning can describe what he saw to—”

“Forget it, Caroline,” Pratt said. “I already tried. Mr. Porterhouse insists on seeing for himself.” Pratt looked at him. “Isn’t that so?”

“According to the tax code, which I have in my pocket,” he said, patting the lapel of his blazer, “the assessor must see the space firsthand and make his report. I’m sorry, Dr. Cooke. Those are the rules.”

Caroline stepped around him. She couldn't deal with the bickering and nitpicking—not now and not here. It was funny. She didn't feel any of the fear the others seemed to feel. There was just this pervasive sense of—*welcoming* was the word that came to mind. Like she belonged here. A woman like her aunt didn't stay alone in a place like this without loving it. And, loving it, she didn't pass it on to someone unless she sensed that that person would love it too.

Caroline ran her eyes and then her slender hand over the great iron knocker. She felt the rough surface, the years of erosion—yet the enduring weight of it in her hand. She smiled as she pushed on the door and entered the great foyer.

Banning spit into the foliage and grabbed his jackhammer. He hoisted it over his shoulder as the men followed her inside.

The door shut heavily by itself. Pratt turned to the left and flicked a switch, which turned on a large, central chandelier. The four visitors stood quietly in a tight line for a long moment.

"Oh, I *am* in love," Caroline said.

The young woman breathed deeply through her nose. The scent of garlic was subtle. The castle smelled mostly of age: damp stones, decades of candlewax, and smoky fireplaces. Fine particles of gray soot rose from the large fireplace to the right, stirred by the opening of the door. The cloud of ash hung delicately in the sunlight that shone through the windows.

Pratt sidled up to Caroline. "It's strange," he said. "These smells are so much your aunt that it's difficult to believe she won't come sweeping down the staircase and sit behind her writing desk."

"Hey," Banning snapped, "don't talk like that. Yer givin' me the shivers."

"I wasn't talking to you," Pratt replied.

Caroline pointed to the heavy escritoire located across from the door in the foyer. "That's her desk over there?"

Pratt nodded. "Odd place for it, don't you think?"

Caroline turned around. "I don't think so," she said. "Not if you keep the door open or the fireplace burning. You can look out on the bay, maybe watch the moonlight. See the lighthouse." Caroline's eyes moved from the intricate floor tiles to the imposing staircase to the medieval tapestry behind

it. “No, Mr. Pratt. This is the perfect place to write the kind of stories she wrote.”

“Well, it is the showpiece of the castle,” Pratt said. “Sturdy and timeless.” He glanced at Banning and pointed to the left. “You know where the basement is. If you wouldn’t mind getting underway . . .”

“I wouldn’t mind that at all,” Banning said. He shot Caroline a look. “I was nineteen years old when I came here to close that place up. Not a week has gone by that I haven’t thought about the willies this place gave me.”

Caroline turned to the left. She faced the large, arched door that was closed on the bricked-up entrance. “You closed the basement up,” she said, “but you have no idea why my great-aunt wanted it sealed?”

“Not a one, Dr. Cooke. All I remember is that there was a slippery staircase and a lake down there.”

“A lake?” Caroline asked.

“Yes’m,” he said. “Fed by the bay through the cove. Maybe it sent up a draft, I dunno. Pratt’s grandad—the sheriff—checked the lake. He didn’t find any bodies or anything, so we also used a little dynamite on the cave feedin’ the lake. Closed that baby right up. Then I blocked this entrance up and that was that.” He glared at Porterhouse. “Of course, *my* word that it’s empty, the word of a Korean War vet, ain’t good enough for Uncle Sam’s bloodhound here. He’s gotta wreck the wall an’ nose around for hisself.”

“I have a job to do,” Porterhouse said, removing his sunglasses and tucking them in the outside pocket of his blazer. “And so do you. Are you ready?”

“I guess the hell I am,” Banning said, excusing his Spanish once more as he walked to the basement door, his tool belt rattling. He turned the brass handle but the door didn’t open. “So, yer gonna fight me, are ya?” he said. Standing his jackhammer against the wall, he fished a small can of WD-40 from his pocket. He gave the hinges two squirts each then tried the door again. It opened grudgingly, a screeching inch at a time. “Not bad for a half a century of crusted grime an’ ocean salt. That’s one good thing about this place.”

“What is?” Caroline asked.

“It may be creepy, but it don’t creep the way houses do on the mainland.” Banning pulled a pair of clear goggles from a pocket. “This place was built out of stone on top of granite. The mansions back ashore are practically built on sandbars, some of them. They sink an’ wobble over the years. Also, except for the stairs in the basement, there ain’t very many timbers in this place. There ain’t much for the seawater to warp and rot. That’s why this door is still almost perfectly flush even if the hinges are a little rusty.”

“Constructed to last,” said Pratt.

“You said it,” Banning said. “This castle may’ve been built by nutburgers, but they did it right.” He slipped his goggles on without removing his cap. Then he motioned the others back and leaned over the jackhammer. “I’d gimme a good ten yards if I were all of you. The chips’re gonna fly.”

“Hold it, Mr. Banning,” Caroline said anxiously.

He turned and looked at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you have to use that?”

“You mean Jack the Ripper?”

“If that’s what you call it,” Caroline said.

“I do . . . And yes, I do. Have to use it, I mean.”

She pointed to the molding between the wall and the ceiling. “Some of those arabesques are rather fragile. Your machine might shake them apart.”

“Sweetie,” Banning said, “Mr. Pratt here was right. These walls and designs are tough. They’ve stood up to storms pushin’ hundred-an’-twenty-mile-an-hour winds. Me an’ Jack won’t do more than rattle a few cobwebs loose, I promise. In fact, I’m not even gonna cut much of a hole—just enough for Mr. P. to crawl through, poke around with his flashlight, and crawl back out again.”

“Come again?” Porterhouse said.

Banning cocked his head toward Pratt. “Yer gettin’ a mouse hole, chief. Lawyer’s instructions.”

“The law says we have to let you in,” Pratt told him. “It doesn’t say we have to cut you a door.”

Porterhouse's gaze turned icy. "The least you could have done was warn me, Pratt. I wouldn't have worn good clothes."

"Sorry," Pratt said insincerely.

"Y'can go out and get a drop cloth from the boat if you want," Banning said.

"No," Porterhouse said. "Let's just get on with this."

Banning glanced at Pratt. "Actually, it's gonna get a little dusty in here. You might want to open the door for ventilation."

"Good idea," Pratt said.

He walked over and tugged the door open. As he did, Caroline looked out. The sky was now a blue-black and the early moon hovered low behind the trees on the mainland. Caroline felt herself comforted by the sound of the waves breaking against the rocks on the shore.

"You're really taken with the place," Pratt said.

Caroline nodded. "I was thinking before that Aunt Joan must have known I'd feel at home here. She must have sensed it somehow. She knew I'd take care of the Tombs for her."

"You know," Pratt said, "it's just a thought, but if you're really interested in staying here permanently—and I hope you are—you could probably set up a practice in LaMirada and turn this place into a bed and breakfast. I'll bet you could charge three, maybe four hundred dollars a night for a room."

Porterhouse, who had been watching Banning prime the jackhammer engine, turned to Pratt. "In that case, Counselor, I'd have to come out and reassess the Tombs. The tax rates are different for private residences than for businesses."

"Don't worry, Mr. Porterhouse," Caroline said. "I wouldn't want to do that anyway. If I decided to sell my practice and move down here, I wouldn't want the Tombs to be an inn."

"I understand," Pratt replied. He smiled. "Maybe you could continue the family tradition and write."

"I don't think so," Caroline said. "Painting is my hobby, Mr. Pratt. And this foyer would make a wonderful studio. The royalties from my aunt's

books will provide me with a healthy income. There's no need to change what the Tombs has always been. Someone's home."

The conversation was disrupted by the noisy hum of the jackhammer as Banning pulled the starter handle. Holding the two grips tightly, he placed the tip of the insert steel against the top of the lowest brick, squeezed the handle control, and began chipping away the dry mortar.

Caroline felt a jolt, as though the steel had penetrated her body. The sensation passed, but she turned toward the basement door and watched with concern as the chunks fell away like the words of a broken promise.

THREE

The great castle vibrated from the top of its sloped turret to the imposing cornerstone on the island's northwest side. The old stones themselves seemed to be moaning as the drone of the jackhammer was transferred from one to the next. Cavernous rooms, untenanted for decades, amplified the sound and sent it rolling like a roar toward the darkening sky.

Beneath the sealed basement door, the waters of the long-hidden lake did a choppy dance. The rotting wood of the staircase came apart in tiny splinters and rats and flies that had found their way in hurriedly found their way out again. The pleasant company of death was one thing. The company of humans was quite another.

A short flight below the barricaded door, to the right of the landing, a group of stones did more than jiggle. They moved as one—an upright, oblong slab turning around iron hinges set in the ceiling and in the floor.

The thick doorway opened slightly, barely more than an inch. Fetid air leaked from the room beyond, joining the rank atmosphere without.

Behind the door, a small room also shuddered under the relentless pounding. Spiders scuttled away as their cobwebs shook loose. Strand after strand floated to the floor, some of them landing on an old wooden chair, some on an ancient iron grate in the center of the floor. Some of it fell upon a desiccated body that lay on its back beside the grate in the heart of the room. The body was also trembling.

Protruding from the chest of the body was a jagged piece of looking glass. As the room shook, dust-sized particles fell from the top side of the glass. Small flakes of silver snowed onto the sleeve of the corpse and onto the floor. The mirror itself wiggled, sheathed in dry flesh that no longer held

it snugly. The glass rose up and up until it finally tumbled over, hitting the floor and breaking apart with a tinkle.

The jackhammering stopped. The cobwebs beside the body were still, covered with a fairy-tale coating of silver. A lone rat bravely poked its nose into the room, sniffed, and then quickly exited. For a moment, there was peace.

Then the pounding started again. It grew louder as the tip of the jackhammer broke through the first bricks. Light entered the basement for the first time in over twoscore years. Glittering diamonds seemed to flit across the top of the waters and a whisker-thin slice of light penetrated the darkness of the hidden room.

It penetrated the darkness and slashed across the hollow, graying chest of Lawrence Talbot.

FOUR

"That oughta do it," Banning said. He stepped away from the brick wall and surveyed his handiwork.

"Very good," Pratt said. He glanced at Porterhouse and smirked. "Your turn, William."

William Porterhouse looked from Pratt to the opening to the man who'd cut it. His eyes seemed to narrow with each stop. "That," he said, pointing, "is not an entrance. It's a wasp hole."

Banning shrugged. "If the shoe fits—"

"It most certainly does not," Porterhouse said.

Caroline was leaning against the jamb in the open castle doorway, watching the brightest stars wink on against the soft wash of moonlight. She tried hard to ignore the men and their desecration of the Tombs.

Porterhouse turned to Caroline. "Dr. Cooke, I'm a reasonable man—"

"When it suits you," Pratt said.

"However," the assessor went on, "I must insist on a more commodious opening! Not only is that—*that fissure* unsafe but, speaking frankly, I believe it's punitive."

"Hey," Banning said, "it's gettin' late. We ain't got time for big words or big holes."

Caroline turned toward Porterhouse. This had been the first moment she'd had to relax, to savor the fact that the castle was hers. Really *hers.* She wasn't going to let this man and his whining or Banning and his silly wisecracks or Pratt and his well-intentioned legal tricks spoil the moment for her.

“Do you know, Mr. Porterhouse,” she said calmly, “I was an architecture minor in college.”

“I did not know that,” he said politely through his teeth.

“Yes. I couldn’t decide if I wanted to preserve landmarks or human lives. I finally decided on humans, though I’m not sure I made the right decision. The point is, some of the arabesques I was mentioning earlier are lincrusta.”

“More big words!” Banning complained.

Caroline said, “Lincrusta are wall coverings that look like leather, only they’re not. You know what they are?”

No one answered.

“They’re animal glue and pressed wood. Very rare and very fragile. I was just thinking, I wonder what the Florida Landmarks Conservancy would say if they knew what was going on here?”

Pratt looked at the woman with open admiration. “I’ll bet they wouldn’t be very happy if they knew we were risking some very, very valuable works so the county can make a few extra bucks.”

“The FLC has no authority on La Viuda,” Porterhouse said with a sniff. “This castle has never been declared a landmark.”

“Do you doubt they’d declare it one?”

“I’m not qualified to say,” Porterhouse replied. “I only know that it isn’t one right now. I also know that that hole isn’t fit for a man to enter. And I *also* know that I’m losing patience with all of you.”

“That’s your problem,” Pratt said.

“I can make it yours, I promise,” Porterhouse replied. “First thing tomorrow morning I can get an extension of the tax warrant. And I’ll have it amended to make sure that Ms. Raymond didn’t seal up other rooms. That there aren’t any hidden closets or attics or trapdoors in this godforsaken—”

“Look,” Pratt said, “this isn’t a legal issue. It’s a matter of morality.”

“That’s a funny thing for a lawyer to be sayin’,” Banning remarked. “Listen, Porterhouse. I don’t care about anything except gettin’ out of here. So you better start crawlin’.” He started toward the door with his jackhammer. “I’m gonna get the stuff to close that opening back up.”

“Wait!” Porterhouse barked.

“Don’t wait,” Pratt said to Banning. “Mr. Porterhouse, this is all the drilling we intend to do. Which means you have three choices. First, I *will* accommodate you. We’ll make the opening larger. But you have to wait while we have the wall chipped away by hand. I don’t want to cut away one inch more than is necessary, so you’ll have to stand here and say when.”

“If you want that, yer doin’ it yerself,” Banning said. “I ain’t stayin’ in this place that long.”

“Fine,” Pratt continued. “Second, you can get a court order to force us to take the rest of the door down, which will take days if not weeks—”

“The assessment must be done within seven days of death,” Porterhouse said, “or the maximum allowable tax is levied.”

“Levy it,” Caroline dared.

“He won’t,” Pratt said. “Because then the Florida Probate Commission will have to review the case and I’ll argue that we made a reasonable effort to accommodate Mr. Porterhouse. If we win, they get the minimum allowable tax.”

“You call this effort sincere?” squawked the assessor. “An opening the size of a doggie door?”

“If the other shoe fits . . .” Banning said as he edged past Caroline.

“Mr. Porterhouse,” Pratt said, “we cut a hole suitable for your size if not your attire, for which I’m truly sorry, and have placed no time restrictions on your examination. We stand here ready to help in any way we can. I would say that that constitutes a sincere effort. Which leaves us with option number three. You can stop complaining, go in there now, and get this damn thing *over* with.”

Porterhouse stood still, his mouth drawn tight, his eyes furious little squints. After a long moment, he turned and stalked over to the two-foot-tall by three-foot-wide opening. “I don’t appreciate being bullied,” he said. “A formal complaint will be filed against the executor of the estate.”

“And we don’t appreciate being threatened,” Pratt replied. “A countercomplaint will be waiting.”

Porterhouse huffed once, then again. Then he looked at Caroline. “In deference to the grieving niece, I’ll go.”

“Thank you,” Caroline said.

Porterhouse removed a tape measure from his blazer pocket. Then he unshouldered his camera case, which hung from a long, leather strap. Finally, he slipped the jacket off, laid it carefully across the chair behind the desk, and squatted outside the opening. He flicked on the flashlight, shined it in, and poked his head through. He quickly withdrew it.

"Lord!" he, said.

"What's wrong?" Caroline asked.

"It smells foul down there."

"I can imagine," Banning said. "It was pretty mildewy when I was down there."

Pratt crouched beside the tax man. "If you'll agree that the basement's between five and seven percent of the entire area of the house, as I've calculated, we can close it up and skip the smells."

"That is *not* the way to do a proper assessment," Porterhouse said.

"Suit yourself," Pratt replied, rising. "We'll see you later."

Frowning, Porterhouse pushed his camera through the opening, lowered himself to his knees, and squeezed in. He had to angle his shoulders to get his chest through. The sides of his belt caught on jagged pieces of brick. He had to jiggle to free himself.

"Call if you need anything," Pratt said.

"A larger opening," Porterhouse said as he struggled through.

"Except that," Pratt said. As Porterhouse vanished, Pratt turned to Caroline. "I'm sorry you had to go through all of this."

"It's all right," she said. "I actually feel kind of bad for him."

"Save it," Pratt advised. "People who only see black and white make their own problems. There's got to be give-and-take."

"I suppose so," Caroline said.

She stepped aside so Banning could lay a blanket on the old tiles. A moment later he pulled in a dolly loaded with fresh bricks. As she stepped back into the doorway Caroline saw that the full moon had risen high and proud over the mainland. She walked outside and smelled the salt air, felt the cool, refreshing breeze. Pratt followed her and they both stared up.

“It’s funny how my great-aunt saw the moon and thought of vampires and werewolves,” she said.

“Only a full moon for werewolves,” Pratt pointed out. “How did Ms. Raymond put it in *The Wails of Wales?* ‘The force that pulls man from God as irrevocably as it pulls the tides from the shore.’ ”

Caroline smiled. “It’s strange. Whenever *I* look at the moon I feel a real sense of tranquility.”

“So do I,” said Pratt. “In another of Ms. Raymond’s werewolf stories —‘Destiny,’ I think it was—she described the moon as the eye of God looking down on us, judging us. She said that it blinked over the course of a month, and only the damned dared to work their evil when the eye was open. I always liked that image of the moon as the eye of God watching over us, protecting us.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“Why can’t you? Too intangible for a woman of science?”

“Not at all,” she said. “I’ve seen deep depression cause illness and I’ve seen willpower heal the sick. That’s pretty intangible.”

“Touché,” Pratt said.

“I guess I just don’t believe there’s any kind of benevolent force behind existence. If there were, we’d be doing better—”

“Pratt!” Banning yelled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Porterhouse says he’s found something.”

Pratt turned and ran into the foyer. Caroline followed him. She could hear the tax assessor’s voice coming from deep inside the basement.

“What?” Pratt asked.

“Hold on!” Banning said. He was leaning close to the opening, listening. “Porterhouse says it looks like there’s a revolving door of some kind.”

“A what?”

“Shhhh!” Banning said. He was still listening. “A door, except it’s made of stone. He says it’s open a crack.”

Pratt looked at Caroline and motioned her away from the opening. “Your great-aunt told me there were just stairs and torches down there and water

from the old ocean-access," he whispered. "She didn't mention anything else."

"I wonder if she even knew," Caroline said.

"Maybe not." Pratt shook his head. "But we certainly don't need this."

"Why?"

"Because if there's a room back there," Pratt said, "one that's been neglected for half a century, we may have building codes and other regulations to deal with." Pratt walked toward the opening. "Banning, tell Porterhouse not to touch it. I'm coming down."

Banning did as Pratt told him. "He says that that's where the smell is coming from. He says it's seriously nasty."

"Great," Pratt said. "Just great."

As he neared the opening, Caroline felt another jolt. Only this time it wasn't the kick of the jackhammer. It was something she hadn't felt here until this moment.

It was fear.

FIVE

Walking slowly, Caroline followed Henry Pratt back to the basement door. She felt a chill and folded her arms across her chest as she stood to the right of the opening. From here she could smell what Porterhouse had been complaining about. It reminded Caroline of when she was a little girl and found a discarded suitcase in a field. She opened it and found a dead cat along with its rotting litter. The animal had crawled inside to have the kittens and then couldn't get out. Caroline was literally knocked off her feet by the smell.

The smell here was almost as bad, and Caroline was still outside the basement. She watched as the attorney squeezed in.

She was annoyed by this latest turn in the desecration of her great-aunt's home. Annoyed yet also intrigued. Did her great-aunt know about the hidden room? And if so, why did she tell no one about it?

She also felt bad for Henry Pratt. She believed what he'd said, that this intrusion into the basement bothered him as much as it did her. She empathized with the tall attorney as he struggled through the opening, especially when it seemed as if his broad hips weren't going to make it through. Pratt had to drop to his belly, then turn on his side and wriggle in, like a worm.

On top of everything else, the hidden room vindicated the fussy Mr. Porterhouse. That had to smart.

"Watch the steps," Porterhouse said, his voice echoing through the chamber. "They're badly rotted."

"Thanks," Pratt said. "I noticed. I don't know what smells worse—these steps or whatever's down there."

“Whatever’s down here,” Porterhouse said. “Trust me.”

Banning turned to Caroline. “I kin fix those steps t’morrow. Matter of fact, if ya want, we can leave this whole thing till tomorrow.”

“I’d rather not,” Caroline said. “Hopefully, no one will be using the stairs after tonight.”

Banning looked anxiously into the young woman’s eyes.

“I’d really like to close this up as soon as Mr. Porterhouse and Mr. Pratt are finished,” Caroline said. “Would you mind waiting just a little longer?”

Banning’s eyes shifted to the front door. “It’s gettin’ kinda late. And how d’ya know they won’t find somethin’ behind that door what needs to be hauled up. Like a sailor’s chest or an old organ.” He looked at her and grinned nervously. “The playing kind, I mean.”

“I know,” she smiled.

“I’m not equipped t’do that.”

“I appreciate your patience, Mr. Banning, and I’ll be happy to pay you any overtime—”

“It ain’t the money, Dr. Cooke. My house an’ my truck’re paid for. But it’s like I been tellin’ ya. I know you love this place an’ all but some of us feel—well, we feel different about it, is all.”

“Tell me, Mr. Banning,” Caroline said. “What is it exactly that you’re worried about? My great-aunt’s garlic? The crosses?”

“That’s part of it.”

“But there are rational explanations for those things. Maybe she used them for inspiration. Maybe they helped her understand her characters better.”

“Some people believe she understood ’em *too* well,” Banning said. “Some people believe that she had some kinda connection with dead things.”

“Connection?”

“Yeah. You know.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t.”

Banning rolled his large eyes. It was easy to see the boy in the man just then. “Some people believe that your great-aunt once had run-ins with the

dead. The living dead. That they once lived on this island—in this castle."

"I see."

"Lookit, don't take my word for it, Dr. Cooke. Check out the old newspaper accounts, summer of nineteen forty-eight. When those two shipping clerks, Chick Young and Wilbur Grey, came back to the mainland after their night here, they swore to anyone who would listen, swore to God Almighty Himself, that this was an island of monsters. They said they'd fought with Count Dracula, the Frankenstein Monster, and the Wolf Man."

"It sounds as if those men were agitated," Caroline said.

"Folks say they was crazy."

"I'll bet," Caroline said. "And stress can produce a particular mind-set. It can transform trees into claws, shadows into cloaks, or men into monsters. Mr. Pratt told me that you had a serial killer in LaMirada at about the same time and that some people were convinced he was a monster too."

"The Beast of LaMirada *was* a monster—"

"Or maybe it was a wild man who only looked like a monster," Caroline replied evenly. "And maybe those two shipping clerks thought they encountered a Wolf Man and Count Dracula."

"Or maybe they really *did,"* Banning said. He was growing visibly upset. "Why is everyone so goldarn sure about these things? I see it on TV all the time, on these investigation shows! They say yeah, there *may* be a Bigfoot or an Abominable Snowman. Absolutely, there *could* be a Loch Ness Monster. Okay, there *might* be flyin' saucers with Pillsbury Doughboy people inside."

"They'll say anything to get ratings."

"But I seen the photographs! They have experts on who say they aren't fakes! So who's to say hell no, there ain't no Yeti or space aliens? Who's to say there ain't no such thing as a vampire named Count Dracula or a werewolf called the Beast of LaMirada or an eight-foot-tall monster made from dead bodies?"

Caroline was sorry she'd started this. She took one of Banning's hands between hers but he snatched it back.

"Don't treat me like I'm nuts myself," the mason huffed.

“Mr. Banning, calm down,” Caroline said. “I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“People ain’t as smart as they think, Dr. Cooke. Shakespeare said there’s more things in heaven and earth than people dream about, and I believe they’re also under the earth in dark basements.”

“I understand,” she said. “I truly do.”

Banning looked at his watch. He used a longish nail to scrape dried mortar from the crystal. “I’m real sorry, Dr. Cooke, but they got ten minutes in there. If I ain’t slappin’ mortar on brick by then—”

“Caroline!” Pratt shouted.

Banning froze like a stalked deer. “Oh Jesus,” he moaned.

Caroline crouched by the opening. “Yes, Mr. Pratt?”

“Caroline, I’m on a landing halfway down the steps,” he said. “Mr. Porterhouse is right. There’s some kind of door here. It’s slightly ajar, though not enough so that we can see inside. We’re going to try and open it a little more. It’s made out of stone and it looks like it swivels around the center.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“I don’t know,” Pratt said. “You can almost taste the rust and mildew on the door but that’s definitely where the smell’s coming from. Hold on. We’re going to give the door a little nudge.”

“Be careful!” she said.

“I will.”

“Of the house, I mean,” she added playfully.

Pratt’s laugh echoed through the cellar. “Thanks, Caroline. I needed that.”

Caroline stayed where she was and looked up at Banning. From the wide, expectant look in his eyes she could just imagine what he was thinking. *It’s the resting place of Count Dracula.* She resisted the urge to make a joke about this being the closet where her aunt kept all her skeletons. Instead, she waited in silence as the door groaned like a big, arthritic dog. While it was being opened, Caroline could also guess what was going through

Porterhouse's mind. *Smugglers' gold. Sixty percent for the Collier County Tax Assessor's Office and Employee of the Month for me*

"How's it going?" Caroline asked.

There was no answer.

"I don't like this," Banning muttered. He looked at his watch. "How long'd I say I'd give 'em?"

"Ten minutes."

"Two was enough," Banning decided. He picked up his jackhammer, ducked his shoulder beneath it, stood erect, and began walking away.

"Wait, Mr. Banning!" Caroline said. She rose and grabbed his arm lightly. "We need you here."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Cooke, but I ain't stayin'." He tugged free. The moon was shining through the door and he stepped into the oblong box of white light on the floor. "I'm scared gutless and I ain't ashamed to admit it. I can't explain it any better than that. I'm just plain afraid and I gotta go."

"But Mr. Banning, there's nothing to be afraid *of."*

"That may be. Then again, that may not be. One of us'll have a good laugh at the other one come mornin'."

"Your mortar will be hard by then."

"That's the only thing that *will* be, ma'am, for a good long time," he said. He looked around the foyer and shuddered. "Don't worry about it. I'll make more."

Caroline sighed and shook her head. "I don't believe this. A grown man afraid of the dark—"

"Not the dark," Banning said. "What comes out in the dark. And you ain't gonna shame me inta stayin'. I'm a grown man who's smart enough to know that he don't know everything. What time d'you get up?"

"Early," she said with resignation. "About six."

"I'll be here then," Banning said as he backed toward the door. "I'm sorry. I truly am."

"I believe you are. Listen, Mr. Banning," she said. "We're going to be neighbors and I don't want to get off on the wrong foot." She extended her

hand. “I’m sorry if it sounded like I was judging you. I wasn’t. I was only trying to understand.”

Banning accepted her hand. “Thanks,” he said. As soon as he reached the doorway he turned, waved, and strode away.

Caroline could hear his tools jangling all the way down the hill. She heard them jangle faster the farther he got. Ordinarily, weak men made her skin crawl. But she hadn’t lied to him. She did want to understand. While Banning’s departure was inconvenient, it wasn’t weakness. To the contrary. He had a strong belief in the supernatural and in a weird way she respected that.

The revolving door stopped groaning and the young woman turned back to the opening. She held her breath, bent low, and peered downstairs. In the reflected glow of the flashlight she could see Pratt standing behind Mr. Porterhouse. The tax man stepped toward the partially open door, shined the flashlight into the dark, and leaned his head forward. Pratt stepped up and leaned in behind him.

“Do you see anything?” Caroline asked.

Pratt turned from the door and coughed into his open hand. “Yes,” he said. “The front half of what seems to be an empty little room.”

“We don’t know that it’s empty,” Porterhouse cautioned. “There could be other rotating panels like this one. Other rooms.”

“Other empty rooms.”

“We’ll see,” Porterhouse said to Pratt. “Something’s causing that smell and it isn’t the moss. Hold my camera, please.”

Pratt took the Bolsey. “You’re going to try to squeeze in?”

“I have to,” Porterhouse said. “It’s my job.”

“You want me to hold the flashlight too?”

“No,” said Porterhouse. “If I find anything, I want to be able to examine it.”

As Caroline listened to his feet slosh along wet, mossy stone, she felt a stab in her heart. She contemplated an endless series of rooms, an equally endless tax bill, and having to sell the Tombs to pay it. She was half-tempted to call Henry Pratt back and, Poe-like, wall the tax man up. She

wondered if his moans would reach the mainland and what Mr. Banning would make of them.

Easy, she warned herself. *You're getting spooky and you've only been in the castle a few minutes.*

She heard Mr. Porterhouse grunt for a few moments as he squeezed past the door. Then he said he was testing the floor with the toe of his shoe before stepping in further. She heard a gentle *squoosh* as he moved forward.

"The floor doesn't seem as slippery in here," Porterhouse said after a moment. "In fact, I'm about two feet in now and the place is dry, like a cedar closet. The air, too. Very strange."

"Can you see what's making the smell?" Pratt asked.

"No," he shouted back, "but it's funny. Even that doesn't seem as bad now."

Suddenly the light inside the room winked out. The flashlight broke audibly as though it had been thrown.

"William!" Pratt said. "Are you okay?"

"I don't—" he began, then abruptly fell silent.

There was a moment of deep, deep silence. Caroline half-expected Porterhouse to complain that he'd slipped and was going to sue. Instead, a strangled, gurgling gasp suddenly snuck from the room, barely loud enough to hear.

"William!" Pratt cried.

The gurgling stopped.

"William!"

Caroline stuck her head in the dark opening. She entered up to her slender shoulders. Porterhouse was right. The smell was no longer as overpowering.

"Mr. Pratt, what's happening down there?"

"I don't know," Pratt said. "I can't freakin' *see."*

Caroline listened as he set the camera down. "What are you doing?" she yelled down.

"Going in."

"No, wait!" she said. "I'll get another flashlight!"

“There aren’t any,” he said. “Your aunt used candles and I don’t want to light a match down here. That smell could’ve been gas of some kind. William!” he shouted. “I’m coming in. Can you hear me?”

She could tell from the muffled sound of Pratt’s voice that he’d slipped past the rotating door.

“William, if you can’t answer then try and move. Tap. Make a noise and I’ll come to—”

Suddenly, Porterhouse shrieked. *“God—help me!”* he cried in a voice so loud and high that it broke through whatever was constricting it.

“William!” Pratt yelled.

“What’s *happening!”* Caroline yelled down.

“I don’t know—I can’t see! William, where *are* you?”

Pratt’s footsteps suddenly stopped. The heavy silence was broken only by the waves and the distant putter of Banning’s boat.

After a few seconds Caroline grew anxious. “Mr. Pratt— Henry?”

“Quiet!” he said. “Someone’s here with us.”

Caroline started when she heard that. Her first reaction was that there was another way in, perhaps the cove Banning had spoken of, and someone was living there. Her second reaction was that maybe Stephen Banning was right.

“Mr. Pratt, please come back up,” she said.

He didn’t answer.

“Henry!”

“I hear breathing,” Pratt said. “No, not breathing. It’s more like panting.”

“Isn’t it Mr. Porterhouse?”

“No,” Pratt replied. “I hear him breathing too.”

“Henry,” Caroline said, “I’m going to call the sheriff’s office. Something’s not right.” She started to pull out when she heard the sounds of scuffling. She stopped. Once again the silence was complete.

“Henry?”

The silence continued for several seconds. And then Pratt cried out, causing Caroline to jump.

“Let go!” he screamed.

Caroline heard scuffling sounds. “Henry, get out of there!”

“I *can’t.”* he screamed. “Something’s got my leg.”

“Is it Porterhouse? Pull him out—”

“It isn’t Porterhouse. I don’t know what it is—*oh my God!”*

“What’s wrong?”

“Stop! Please stop!”

Caroline was about to leave the opening and get a match—gas be damned—when she heard what sounded like a long, low note on a double bass. If that sound was coming from something alive, then it wasn’t human. With an oath, Caroline backed into the foyer. She rose, looked around, and saw candles on a long table. She hurried over and pulled open a drawer. As she riffled through the odds and ends looking for matches, she heard another sound from the opening. This one wasn’t like a bass. This was more like the roar of a leopard.

“No, don’t!” Pratt yelled under the monstrous bellowing. *“Please don’t —”*

Then Pratt screamed.

“Henry, I’m coming!” Caroline shouted back.

The monstrous roar stopped suddenly when she called out. It resumed a heartbeat later, so rattlingly loud that Caroline could feel it in her rib cage. She covered her ears with the heels of her hands and breathed deeply to release the knot in her chest. Then, her breath and heart racing, she turned back to the drawer.

Searching frantically through her aunt’s belongings she was unable to find a match. With a cry of frustration, she looked up and around. She saw a long, gold matchbox at the fireplace and ran over. Flipping it open, she grabbed a match and an iron poker then ran back to the opening. Kneeling, she lay the iron down and struck a match on a brick. As she did, the roar stopped.

The distant breakers were calm now and even the hum of Banning’s engine was gone. Caroline stared at the black opening as she listened to the quiet. She knew she wasn’t alone, but she felt it.

“Henry?” she said softly. “Mr. Porterhouse?”

The men didn’t answer, nor had Caroline expected them to. In the moments she’d had to think rationally, she had visions of an alligator or a snake of some kind having slunk in and out of the basement, possibly through the underground waterway. That might also explain the stench. Perhaps Mr. Porterhouse had smelled a room full of animal carcasses or nests of eggs. Perhaps a crocodile had made that terrible cry. Maybe that was why her great-aunt had had the room sealed off. She was the kind of person who wouldn’t have wanted to disrupt the animals’ lives. Whatever it was, Caroline knew that they had brought this on themselves. Her great-aunt had known best and they’d disobeyed.

Shielding the lighted match with her left hand, Caroline turned toward the opening. She moved the match in slowly, then picked up the fireplace iron and crawled through.

The fuzzy orange glow of the match didn’t illuminate very much. Caroline saw the mossy stone walls on either side of the opening. They were dripping with brackish moisture. She could also see the first deep brown plank of the staircase. It looked sturdy enough, though it too was covered with moss.

She snuggled through the opening up to her waist. The smell was definitely stronger in here although not as bad as before. It reminded her of the dead cats, of rot piled upon rot.

The wooden match was burning down quickly. In her panic she’d forgotten to bring another. But she was already in this far; she’d see what she could see and then go back for the rest of the box. She crawled in further, working her hips through the opening. The fire iron clunked against the stone landing as she moved her left hand. She saw three steps now and the glimmer of placid waters off to the left. The glow didn’t reach far enough to light the rotating doorway. She was confident that an alligator couldn’t make it up these stairs, though she took the precaution of looking up in case there was a coiled snake or a bat or a colony of rats or spiders poised atop a rafter. There was nothing.

She crawled all the way in then looked down the stairs.

“Mr. Porterhouse? Henry?”

Caroline tensed as the hinges of the door below squeaked and then stopped. She squinted in that direction. She couldn't see anything past the first step.

"Henry, is that you?"

Probably not, she thought. She didn't hear the same wet footsteps she'd heard earlier. In fact, she didn't hear footsteps of any kind.

Frustrated at not being able to see, Caroline inched forward. She pulled herself through the opening up to her thighs. Her chin was directly above the first step now and she looked down to the second and third steps. As she did, she felt a radiant warmth coming from beneath her. She looked down as the match burned low. It failed to penetrate very far into the darkness. She saw only the mossy, worm-eaten wood and the blackness beneath it. She cursed herself for not having brought along other matches or a goddamn candle. Impatience had always been one of her most serious flaws.

She looked ahead. *"Henry! Mr. Porterhouse!* Make a noise if you can hear me. Grunt. Scratch. Anything."

A moment later the match flickered then died. The wooden stub glowed orange for a moment, she saw white smoke rising from it, and then there was nothing.

"Shit," Caroline said. She dropped the match but she didn't back out. Holding tight to the poker in her left hand she put her right hand on the stone. She listened, unmoving, as her eyes adjusted to the blackness.

The small of her back tingled as she heard something creak beneath her. Not directly beneath her but some yards below. It was difficult to judge distance in the dark, but the sound hadn't come from the landing down by the water. It seemed to come from the stairs, though there hadn't been anything on them a moment before. She held the poker out like a sword. She waved it slowly in front of her. There was nothing there. At least, nothing she could touch. She decided she would exit, get the matches, set up a few candles, and maybe try to light those torches Pratt had mentioned.

The steps creaked again. The sound was closer now and she realized that it was coming from *underneath* the steps and not upon them. Still holding the poker in front of her, Caroline let her empty right hand creep forward. She reached the edge of the first step and stopped. Slowly, she extended her

fingertips along the surprisingly spongy surface and over the far side. The air felt humid there, as though there were something just beyond her reach.

Screw this, Caroline thought as she put her right palm down and began to crawl backward. As she did, her left knee came down on a large brick chip that had been dislodged by Banning. Pain shot all the way to her thigh and her leg buckled. She dropped the poker beside her.

"Shitshitshit!" she hissed.

Caroline rested on her forearms for a moment. Then she got back up into a crawling position. As she did, she smelled the same stench from before only it was milder . . . and very near. She sniffed around. A moment later she heard a low, guttural sound. The growling was even closer than the creaking steps; it sounded almost as though it was directly below her. Her eyes dropped to the rotted first step.

Two eyes stared up at hers from just below the plank. They were upside down, like a reflection in a spoon, and they appeared human-sized, although they were ruby-red with large dark centers. The eyes narrowed as she gazed into them. A moment later she felt a blast of hot, rank air as the guttural sound became a roar.

Caroline jerked back just as wood splinters flew straight up in front of her. The explosion was followed by the arrival from below of a huge, foul-smelling thing. Light from the foyer slipped around the young woman as she backed frantically through the opening. It fell in slashes on the shape moving in front of her, illuminating patches of light brown fur, white teeth and claws, and dark, tattered clothing.

She exited quickly up to her waist, then had to stop and maneuver her shoulders through. She cursed the rough corners, which tore at her. As she struggled out, she heard the creature bellow. Desperately hugging herself to shrink her shoulders, Caroline scurried backward on her knees. Her face was turned inward, to her crotch, and as she popped through the opening she felt the tips of the claws rake the back of her neck. The monstrous paw closed around her hair and yanked.

"No!" Caroline screamed as she fell onto her chest. Dragged into the opening, she planted her hands against the outside of the wall to prevent herself from being pulled back in. She locked her elbows as the attacker

roared in her ear. Stiffening her neck and lifting her head, she tried to pull her hair free. As she did, the moonlight fell across her face.

For a moment, Caroline felt her attacker's arm go slack. The bellowing died. She didn't bother trying to figure out why. She grabbed her hair so it wouldn't hurt as much, then wrenched her neck to the side and tore free. The attacker's arm stiffened almost immediately and shot after her. But she fell back out of the opening, beyond the creature's reach, and quickly scuttled back several feet. The shaggy arm came after her, followed by a face so terrible that Caroline looked away reflexively. She kept pushing back until she was halfway across the foyer. Only then did she allow herself to look back at the opening.

The face in the basement was covered with short, bristly, tawny-colored fur, which thinned around the neck and then grew full again just below the throat. The only exposed flesh were thick, dark brown folds under the eyes and also the bridge of the nose, which had wrinkles so deep they seemed like ridges. The nose ended in a black, leathery tip with nostrils that flared whenever the red eyes did. The creature's blood-smeared lips were thin on top, thick on the bottom, and dark. Save for two upraised canines and a thin film of red, the rest of the teeth seemed normal.

Howling with rage, the beast—could this be *the* Beast?—struggled to get its too-broad shoulders through the opening. After each vain attempt the monster would withdraw angrily, twist slightly, then charge again, as though brute strength would be sufficient to get through the remaining bricks. Caroline quietly thanked poor Henry Pratt for his insistence that the hole not be made any larger. She also quietly apologized to Stephen Banning. He was right, the eccentric old mason. This was no myth wailing before her.

Every now and then the creature would stop and look at Caroline with a kind of eerie calm, as though it were actually thinking. Then, as if becoming frustrated with the process, he would roar and attack the wall again in an effort to get out.

After a few minutes Caroline had composed herself sufficiently to try to communicate with the creature. Kneeling on her uninjured knee, she held out her hands and uttered a long, loud *"Shhhh*—calm down." She was

going to add that she wouldn't hurt him, but even the thought of that was ludicrous.

Though she spoke softly and slowly her efforts only seemed to frustrate the beast. She stopped talking, though something compelled her to stay where she was. Curiosity? Pity? She wasn't sure. Hugging her knees to her chin, she sat there rocking back and forth, thinking.

Assuming that this was the Beast of LaMirada, maybe it had disappeared because it had been locked up. Perhaps it was still alive because it wasn't subject to the natural laws of biology. She also wondered if this could be the selfsame beast that had inspired *The Wails of Wales.* And if this were a werewolf—if there really were such things—would it once again become a man when the sun rose, like the character in her aunt's novels?

Caroline thought about poor Henry and Mr. Porterhouse in the basement. She wondered if there was a chance they might still be alive down there. Maybe she should phone the police.

And then what? she asked herself. If anyone went down there, the beast would stalk and attack them the way it had attacked her and the others. Why should anyone else die, even this creature, when waiting until morning might achieve the same end?

Even if they managed to shoot the monster, she told herself, *would it die?* The werewolf her great-aunt had written about could not be killed by normal means. It had to be slain with silver. If this beast was the reason her aunt had had the basement walled up, then bullets would not harm it.

Caroline shook her head. The creature had retreated from the wall and was gurgling in the dark, just beyond the opening. She could still see its eyes, those bright ruby orbs, but nothing more.

You're out of your mind, thinking about werewolves, she told herself. But that wasn't a man in a Halloween mask who had been battering the wall. It wasn't the whole town of LaMirada playing some kind of bizarre hazing joke on her. Those claws had been real, its cries were inhuman, and its energies were superhuman. The thing had been howling and fighting to get through the opening in the wall, yet it wasn't even breathing hard.

The only way to answer any of these questions was to wait until sunrise. Rising and shutting the front door, Caroline sat down against it, facing the

basement. The monster resumed its attack against the wall, hurling itself at the bricks and dislodging flakes but nothing more. She found it odd that the creature never thought to pick up the poker and attack the opening. Perhaps it didn't have the necessary fine motor skills to do so. Or else it lacked common sense. Not that Caroline was complaining. She didn't know what she'd do if the creature managed to get free. Looking around the foyer, she didn't see anything made of silver.

After a while she heard a splash followed by the sounds of violent thrashing in the water. The monster's howls filled the basement, alternately angry and anguished. Soon those sounds died. Pulling itself back up the broken stairs, the creature flung itself against the opening several times more before finally stopping. It retreated, after which Caroline neither heard nor saw it.

Caroline wondered whether the creature understood the concept of giving up, or whether he'd simply grown too tired to continue. An answer of sorts came from the mournful baying that wafted through the opening several minutes later. It was full of pain, not exhaustion. It was as if the beast *knew* it was a captive. And from the sound of the cry, it was imprisoned in more than just the room.

The wails continued and soon Caroline began to cry. It was probably a combination of things that caused her to sob—the exertion, the deaths, the confusion, the fear—and she continued to weep long after the cries had stopped.

She fell asleep where she was sitting.

SIX

Dawn was announced by a pair of black-and-white warblers nesting in the heavy branches of the trees outside the castle. Their song was cheerful and carefree and it eased Caroline awake.

Fear brought her to attention.

The young woman sat up ramrod straight, palms on the floor. Her knee was sore and her head ached where the creature had grabbed it, though not as bad as some of the migraines she'd had when she was in medical school. She faced the opening in the basement doorway and listened.

There was no sound and the smell was almost entirely gone. Caroline rose very slowly and approached cautiously.

Several panes of light cut across the room, elongating as the sun crept above the high windowsills. Dust from the jackhammering rose in delicate puffs as Caroline walked; they hung in the growing sunlight like mist.

The silence from the basement was unnerving. The opening was just within one of the rectangles of sunlight but it was still dark down there, as black as it had been the night before. Was the monster sleeping or was he lying in wait? Or perhaps he'd managed to get out during the night and was waiting behind her—

She turned rapidly. Dust swirled around her in a gentle eddy. Caroline looked and listened as the pounding of her heart matched and then outpaced the throbbing in her head. Now that she was fully awake she heard seagulls in the distance as well as the faraway drone of motors as fishing boats set out with the sun. And then from somewhere behind her, she heard a soft, deep voice.

"No," the voice said mournfully. "No—it can't be."

Caroline turned back toward the basement. A man's face rose from behind the top step. Lit by the creeping golden sunlight, it looked out with narrow, uncomprehending eyes and a sad, drawn mouth. Thick jowls formed deep creases beside his large nose and his brow seemed frozen in worry. The man's large body was sprawled awkwardly, arms to the side, so as not to fall through the broken steps. Apparently he hadn't seen her.

"I'm alive," the man said, not with joy but with rage. He groaned from deep in his soul as he tore at the long brown hair that hung in his eyes. "How could this happen? *Why* did it happen?"

"Maybe I can answer some of your questions," Caroline said gently.

The man looked up. The sunlight made his flesh seem an unhealthy yellow. He shielded his eyes from the sun. "Who's there?" he asked.

"I think that's my line," Caroline said. "This is my house."

The man's face brightened. "Miss Raymond? Is that you?"

Caroline was taken aback. "No," she replied. She began walking toward him. "Ms. Raymond was my great-aunt. She passed away a few days ago."

The brightness in his face evanesced. "Dead?" he said forlornly. He put his face in his palms again; he appeared lost.

"How do you know my aunt?" Caroline asked.

"She—she tried to help me," the man replied. He looked at her suddenly. "What year is this?"

"What year do you think it is?"

The man's pained eyes closed. "The last time I drew breath was on October 31, 1948."

Caroline abruptly stopped walking. She regarded the tortured young man for several moments. What he'd just said was absurd. Impossible. Yet so was the fact that he was here and the beast was gone.

"October 31, 1948," she repeated. "Halloween."

"Yes," said the man.

"What happened that night?" she asked.

"There was a masque on the mainland," the man said. "That was where I met Miss Raymond." He smiled very slightly. "She was dressed like a Gypsy. She was kind and she was beautiful—as you are."

“I see,” Caroline replied. This had to be a joke. The whole thing. Banning, his stories, Pratt, this man—it was all an act to frighten her away. “Well,” she said, “it’s no longer Halloween and it’s definitely not 1948. It’s June 29, 1998.”

“Nineteen—*ninety-eight?”*

“That’s right.”

The man’s right hand moved absently to the left side of his chest. Through his open shirt, just above his heart, Caroline could see gashes in the shape of a star.

“Then there really is no end to this horror. The curse is forever.” His face seemed to collapse and he slumped back against the wall on the right side of the opening. As he sat there staring to his right, into the dark basement, Caroline realized with a sudden shock that the shirt he had on was the same one the beast had been wearing the night before. It was incredible but it was also undeniable. And though this man might very well have been the thing that attacked her the night before, she resumed walking forward. Though she couldn’t explain it there was something nonthreatening about him, almost docile.

He was still leaning against the wall, nearly lost in the darkness of the basement. She bent over as she walked so that she could see his face in the shadows.

“Now that we’ve answered a few of *your* questions,” she said, “would you mind answering a few of mine? Starting with Who are you?”

“My name is Talbot,” he said. “Lawrence Talbot.”

“How do you do, Mr. Talbot. I’m Caroline Cooke.”

He looked out and bowed his head slightly. “Miss Cooke,” he said softly. Then he flopped back against the wall.

His courtliness didn’t surprise her. It was genuine, utterly unaffected. That, more than anything else, suggested that he was from a different time.

“A moment ago you said there’s no end to this,” Caroline went on. “What were you talking about, Mr. Talbot?”

“The curse,” Talbot said solemnly. “A curse that transforms me into a wolf when the moon is full. A curse that drives me to eat human flesh. A

curse that is more powerful than death." He shook his head. "Miss Raymond is dead while I live. There's no justice in existence. None at all."

"So you're telling me, Mr. Talbot, that not only are you a—a werewolf, if that's the correct term—"

"It is."

"—but that you've also died and been resurrected."

"Several times," Talbot replied. "Your great-aunt, Miss Raymond, helped me to die the last time. She also promised to bury me someplace where I'd never be found." He ran his hand through his hair again. "But they found me. They always find me. The grave robbers in Llanwelly Village, the scientists who were more concerned with research than with human lives —"

"This one wasn't her fault," Caroline said. She stopped a few feet from the opening. Pieces started coming together—pieces that made sense if she were willing to believe him. "Then you were the reason Aunt Joan had the basement sealed off when she bought this place."

"Probably."

"You were dead when she did that?"

He nodded again. "We did it together, with a piece of glass from a mirror."

"Glass?" Caroline said.

"Glass that had a silver backing. We thrust it here," Talbot said, pointing to the star-shaped wound on his chest. "The only way I could ever return from the grave was if someone removed it."

"Which is why my aunt made her executor swear never to open the basement," Caroline said. "God, we were so stupid. All of us."

"The executor should have listened to her."

"Maybe he would have if she'd given him her reasons," Caroline said with a trace of bitterness. "Jesus, Aunt Joan. You should have trusted him. You should have at least let *me* know."

"Why?" Talbot asked. "Would you have believed her?"

"Probably not," Caroline admitted. She regarded him for a long moment. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Talbot, I see you wearing the same clothes I saw

on the beast. I see you sitting in the basement from which this is the only way in or out. And I see that you can't fit through the opening we cut. Yet despite all of that I still find this all difficult to believe."

"That's why creatures such as myself are so dangerous," Talbot said. "People never believe until it's too late."

He has a point, Caroline told herself. And once again she felt mortified by the fact that Stephen Banning had been smarter than all of them. Yet in the sane and comforting light of morning, the young woman still couldn't help but return to the notion that the people of LaMirada were playing a trick on her. Of course, there was one way to find out if this were a joke.

"Mr. Talbot," she said, "last night the executor and another man were attacked down there. Can you see them?"

Talbot sighed heavily. Then he turned around and leaned down the steps, out of the sunlight, so it could shine down to the landing. He peered into the basement. After a moment, he turned back to Caroline. He did not look up at her.

"I see one of them," he said.

Caroline knelt by the opening. The revolving door was slightly ajar and there was a hand lying behind it, palm up. It was coated with blood. Of course, Caroline told herself, that too could be part of a sick gag.

"I'm coming in," she said. "I've got to see if they're—"

"Don't," Talbot said. He swung around, barring her way.

"I'm a doctor," she told him. "I've seen cadavers before."

"Have you ever seen them with the moment of death still frozen in their faces?" Talbot asked.

"Actually, yes," she said. "And during my residency in Los Angeles I saw a few that didn't even have faces."

"Please," Talbot said. "Let me go down. I'll look at them and then bring them up if you want—that room is no place for a woman. Even one who's a doctor."

Caroline sat back on her heels. He *was* an antique. "All right," she said, "but be careful. The steps that weren't wrecked last night are still pretty rotten."

Talbot nodded and rose.

"Mr. Talbot?"

He stopped and looked back at her.

"Before you go, would you mind showing me what's in your pants pockets?"

Without hesitation, Talbot pushed his big hands into the deep-cut pockets of his trousers. He lay the contents on the stone step just inside the opening. Then he turned and started down, using the wall for support as he stepped over the decaying boards.

Caroline reached in and picked the items up. There was a handkerchief, a passport, a torn ticket to the LaMirada Masque, a money clip and currency, coins, and a key. She looked at the key. Stamped in the front was an address: HOTEL LAMIRADA, 4 HAZEL COURT, LAMIRADA, FLA.

It did not say *FL* but *Fla.*—the old-style abbreviation. And there was no zip code. Caroline wondered if the hotel even existed anymore. She examined the coins. There were some British coins as well as two pennies, a nickel, and a shiny silver dollar. They were heavier than any coins Caroline had ever held. She put them down on the handkerchief and slipped the currency from the diamond-studded brass clip. She unfolded it. The seven notes were from the U.S. and from Great Britain, though the designs of the British money were different from any she'd ever seen. She examined the passport. It was British, though she had never seen one like it. The photo was pasted on, not laminated, and it expired in 1949. If this were a gag, someone had been awfully thorough.

She put the money in the clip and pushed everything back through the opening. She sat back again on her heels.

Her great-aunt had begun writing after she moved in here. The first stories she penned were her popular werewolf tales. This man claimed to be such a creature. Her great-aunt's werewolf was from England, and so was Mr. Talbot. From Wales? she wondered. While it was true that someone could have slipped in here to mimic Joan Raymond's stories, the reverse was also true. Her great-aunt may have been inspired to write horror stories after encountering Lawrence Talbot.

Talbot disappeared through the revolving door to the right of the landing. While Caroline waited for him the telephone rang. She hurried over to the antique desk in the corner. In addition to the black telephone, there was a computer, a laserjet printer, and stacks of paper piled in a corner of the desk. Behind the desk were rows of bookshelves thick with volumes old and new.

Caroline hesitated before answering the telephone. It could be her parents calling to see how she was doing, or it might be Mr. Banning wondering if she still wanted him to come back. LaMiradans probably got up with the sun. On the other hand, it could be someone calling for Henry Pratt or William Porterhouse, wondering why they hadn't come home the night before.

Caroline was about to pick up the receiver when the built-in answering machine took the call.

"Hello there. This is Joan Raymond. I'm unable to answer your call, but if you'll leave a message at the tone I'll ring you back. Thank you and goodbye."

There was a beep followed by a man's gruff voice. "Well, it figures I'd call Mornay Castle and get a dead person. If anyone's listening, this is Jim Pratt, Hank's granddad. Hank, when I couldn't reach you at home or on the boat, I woke your secretary and got the number where she thought you're at. If you're still there and can tear yourself away from consoling your pretty new client, it's a little before six a.m. These old hips aren't going to make it around the swamp without you. Think you could give me a call and let me know when you'll be here? Thanks, son. Bye."

Jim Pratt hung up.

Caroline took a deep breath. The shock of what had happened to Pratt and Porterhouse hit her anew. They were *dead.* She couldn't believe this was happening.

Suddenly, Talbot called out. "I thought you said Miss Raymond was dead!"

Caroline turned. Talbot was leaning through the opening. He was struggling to get through.

"She is, Mr. Talbot."

“But I heard her voice! Where is she?”

“That was just her answering machine,” Caroline said.

“Her answering machine?”

“Yes. It’s a tape recording . . . like a record. A phonograph record that answers the phone and then records the caller’s voice.”

Talbot’s brow wrinkled deeply. After a moment he withdrew. He sat back down and leaned heavily against the wall.

Caroline walked over. “Did you examine the men?”

“I did,” Talbot said. “They’re both dead. There’s no point in bringing them up. Just call the police so I can turn myself in.”

Caroline squatted. She looked down the stairs. The hand was gone and the revolving door was closed. Even in his suffering this man was the embodiment of decorum.

“When the police come,” he said, “you must convince them that I am what I am. Tell them what you saw last night. They must waste no time killing me.”

“You can forget that,” she said.

Talbot looked at her. “What do you mean? I’ve killed again. The evidence is down there.”

“With trials and appeals it’ll take anywhere from ten to thirteen years before they put you in the electric chair.”

“Ten to thirteen years?” Talbot said. “No, it has to be tonight! And I have to be killed with a silver bullet.”

As Caroline crouched there she suddenly smelled something strange. It was different from the decaying odor that had been so strong the day before. This smelled like burnt rubber. Frowning, Caroline stuck her head into the opening. She leaned toward the left side of the staircase, the side that overlooked the still waters.

“What is it?” Talbot asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Do you smell something?”

Talbot sniffed. “Yes.”

They both looked downstairs. The sun was rising higher and a few rays of light reached the long-still waters. They revealed a mirror-flat surface,

dark and lifeless.

"The smell is definitely coming from that direction," Caroline said as she leaned over further.

Just then she saw something break the surface. It was small, smooth, and grayish-green. Then whatever it was attached to began to rise. Caroline could tell at once that it was not a marine mammal. It was something from hell.

Talbot bolted toward the water side of the ledge. In his eagerness to see what was there he nearly slipped off the mossy surface. Caroline reached in and grabbed him. When he had regained his balance he looked down.

"No," he cried. *"No!"*

"Who is it?" Caroline demanded. *"What* is it?"

Talbot didn't answer. They watched together as the nose became a face and it rose slowly from the water. The flesh was wrinkled and brittle-looking, vivid green on the cadaverously hollow cheeks and temples, shading to pale green around the eyes and mouth, and grayish on the chin, nose, and along the jaw. There were patches of scabbed, bubbled flesh on the broad forehead and heavy brow, on the neck, and around the ears. They seemed to Caroline like imperfectly healed burns. The lips were pale red and parted slightly, the heavily-lidded eyes were shut, and the long raven-black hair lay flat on top of the squarish head. There was an ugly, jagged rip in the flesh which ran from the hairline nearly to the right eye. As the face rose, another long, ragged scar was visible just beneath the left side of the jaw. Below it, incongruously fresh against the parchmentlike tissue, was a silvery neck-bolt. It glistened with its own sheen as well as the sparkle of the clinging water.

"In answer to both of your questions," Talbot said gravely, "that, Miss Cooke, is the Monster of Frankenstein."

SEVEN

As Caroline and Talbot watched, the Monster's thick, crusted lids opened gradually. The eyes peered ahead. They were not so much black as completely dead and colorless, with only a hint of white on either side of the large irises. The eyes turned slowly toward the top of the staircase.

"It's alive," Talbot said. "Somehow, after all of these years, the Frankenstein Monster is still alive!"

Caroline looked from the creature to Talbot. She'd always dreamed of going down a rabbit hole and finding Wonderland. That was what she'd been looking for in the field when she'd found the dead cats. Now that she'd finally found her rabbit hole she wished she could close it forever.

"This has to be a joke," she said. "You're all in on it for some reason—everyone in LaMirada!"

"I wish it were a joke," Talbot said. "The Monster is real enough to kill. I've seen him do it many times."

"Why is this *happening?"*

"Because none of us can truly die," Talbot replied. He said it as matter-of-factly as when he'd given her his name. "You'd better leave, Miss Cooke."

Caroline looked down at the water. The Monster had floated to the surface. Its massive shoulders were beginning to move and its thin, red lips trembled. Were they trembling from the cold, she wondered, or was the creature attempting to say something?

"Please *go!"* Talbot said to the young woman.

"Not yet, Mr. Talbot. Before I go anywhere you're going to have to convince me that these events are real."

“You see for yourself—”

“What I see is a big man with a hideous face. What I saw last night was a snarling man with a hideous face. I want to know that this isn’t all a big show. Some kind of vendetta against my aunt and her family.”

“It isn’t! You *must* believe me.”

“Must I?” Caroline replied.

She hadn’t actually seen the bodies of Henry Pratt and Mr. Porterhouse and she was starting to doubt again. Starting to think once again that the people of LaMirada were behind all of this. The locals she’d met were quirky enough to plan and execute something insane. Hadn’t Henry Pratt said the castle would make a terrific bed and breakfast? Maybe somebody on the mainland wanted to scare her away and buy the place cheap. And wouldn’t it make the place more marketable to visitors if it were supposedly haunted?

“You’re asking me to believe an awful lot, Mr. Talbot—”

“Right now, I’m only asking you to believe that this creature is dangerous,” Talbot persisted. “He’s evil, Miss Cooke.”

“In what way?”

“Look,” he said, shooting her a worried glance, “if I tell you what I know, will you leave?”

“That depends,” she said.

“Lord, you’re as stubborn as Miss Raymond,” Talbot said as he watched the creature carefully. “A century ago, Dr. Frankenstein built this Monster from the bodies of the dead. But he inadvertently gave his creation a criminal brain. When Frankenstein harnessed lightning in his laboratory and restored life to the dead tissue, the Monster had only one desire. To kill.”

“Randomly?”

“The Monster doesn’t hate the way men do. But he possesses the strength of one hundred men as well as the desire to protect what he likes or destroy what he doesn’t like. To punish those who try to hurt him.”

“What do you think he’s doing here?”

Air hissed slowly from the sides of the Monster’s mouth. The great head moved from side to side. The murky water rippled around him, its lively

little waves making the Monster's stiff flesh seem even more inanimate.

"Miss Cooke, we can discuss this later!"

"Answer me!" she demanded. "What is the Frankenstein Monster doing in the cellar of this castle?"

Talbot looked at her. "Count Dracula brought him here from Europe. I believe he was planning to give him a more subservient brain. Dr. Sandra Mornay was going to perform the surgery."

Caroline wanted to say, *"Yeah, right. Brain transplants. And in 1948 no less."* Instead she asked, "Why?"

"To guard Count Dracula, I suspect. We never found out for sure—"

"We?"

"Myself and Professor Stevens."

"Professor Stevens," Caroline said. "He's the man who was killed here."

"Yes."

"By whom?" Caroline asked.

Talbot looked down at the ledge.

"You did it," she said. "But my aunt told everyone he was killed by—" Caroline stopped. She was beginning to understand—and to believe. Her great-aunt had blamed the murder on the mysterious Count Dracula. She did that in order to protect the name and whereabouts of Lawrence Talbot. But Aunt Joan wouldn't have done that unless Dracula himself was a proven murderer.

A murderer? Or . . . a vampire?

Caroline felt like her mind was being overloaded. She tried to get back to where she was, to follow the story through.

"How did the Monster get down here?" she asked.

"I don't know—" Talbot began, then stopped. "Wait." His forehead wrinkled. "I remember watching as Professor Stevens poured gasoline on the pier. He burned it as the Monster tried to cross. The creature fell into the water. He must have floated or made his way here before the basement was closed off. The Monster was probably searching for Count Dracula." Talbot looked around. "Yes. I remember talking to Chick Young and Wilbur Grey

while they were here early that evening. I believe that this was the very room where the vampire kept the Monster."

"But I don't understand," Caroline said. "How could the Monster have remained alive all these years? And what revived him?"

"Don't you understand yet?" Talbot cried. "Our bodies are not like the bodies of mortal men. Perhaps the fresh air revived him. Perhaps one of those two men found him or maybe something else tore him loose from the bottom of the waters."

The jackhammer, Caroline thought.

The Monster snarled. Caroline and Talbot both looked over the edge as it rose with clumsy effort. Standing taller and taller and dripping mossy water, it was clothed in a charred black coat. Its right wrist was visible now; it was scarred like the face.

Talbot gently pushed Caroline back as the creature jerked from side to side and then front to back as it tried to retain its balance. It failed and fell back with a heavy splash, its arms pinwheeling. The creature lay on its back for a moment before it rose again. Then, half-stumbling, the Monster waded toward the dilapidated pier at the foot of the stairs. He lumbered onto the crumbling planks and stood. Caroline couldn't help but stare. The creature was enormous.

"Get out of here!" Talbot shouted at Caroline.

Caroline crawled backward through the opening then reached in to help Talbot. He was able to get his head through but nothing more.

"You're going to have to push!" she screamed as Talbot pressed his broad shoulders against the opening.

"I'm . . . trying!"

The sharp-edged brick tore the sleeves of his shirt and the tops of his arms. "The poker!" Caroline yelled. She pointed to the iron she'd left there the night before. "The fireplace poker is there, to your left. Use it!"

Talbot picked up the iron, got on his knees, and began hacking at the bricks on the right side. Behind him, the Monster started climbing the stairs. Unaccustomed to carrying the weight of its own body, the creature dropped to his knees. He crawled up several steps and stood again when he reached the landing beside the revolving door. He stood there for a long moment, his

arms waving and his eyes half-shut. The Monster didn't seem to have any destination in mind. Then, apparently hearing the *chink-chink-chink* of the poker on the bricks, the creature tilted its body back and looked up. With a snarl, he started up the second flight of steps. However, no sooner had he put his foot down and placed his weight on it than the rotted wood snapped. The foot fell through to the solid ground underneath. Growling, the giant hunched and threw his shoulders against the staircase. The entire frame shuddered and the Monster hit it again.

Talbot stopped chipping at the bricks on the right and switched to the left. "I don't understand," he said. "The Monster seems to be growing stronger."

"Maybe that's because he's out of the water."

"No," Talbot said. The stairs shook again and he dug harder and faster. Perspiration flew from his forehead and fleshy cheeks with every chop. "The Monster requires electricity for strength."

"What about all the microwaves that're bouncing around?"

"The what?"

"Microwaves. From satellite dishes, cellular phones—"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said angrily. Clearly frustrated with his progress on the wall, he dropped the poker. "This isn't working. Back away—I'm going to try to knock it down."

Talbot wrapped his powerful fingers around the edge of one of the bottommost bricks and began wrenching it back and forth. Dust fell in sheets from the top of the doorway. The wall cracked slightly along the mortar line but the bricks held.

"I'll help," Caroline said. She turned around, put her feet against the bricks, and pushed.

"No!" Talbot said. "Just get away from here!"

Caroline ignored him. Talbot pulled harder on the bricks, grunting with each tug. Finally, with Caroline's help, a leftside section of wall cracked along the mortar. A final pull from Talbot and push from Caroline and it flew inward.

"I think you'll be able to squeeze out now!" Caroline said.

Talbot dropped to his stomach and began wriggling through the enlarged opening. He still couldn't make it and had to lie on his side, diagonally. It was a tight fit but he began worming through.

Caroline looked past him as he struggled. The Frankenstein Monster's growls grew louder as he climbed on the rubble he'd created and pulled himself onto the top half of the staircase. The Monster's head was tilted back and he looked up from under his hooded lids. With a low growl he continued clomping up the second flight of stairs. Whenever they shattered beneath his great weight he stopped, leaned against the wall, and swung a leg up to the next step.

"Hurry," Caroline cried. "He's coming!"

There were only six steps between the Monster and Talbot. In just a few moments Talbot would be within reach of the Monster's long arms. Grabbing his tattered shirt, Caroline tried to pull Talbot through. Grunting, the sharp-edged bricks rending his shirt and flesh, he finally got his waist out. He drew his legs from the basement just as the Monster reached the topmost stair.

"Let's go!" Caroline said as she helped Talbot to his feet.

But the Frankenstein Monster didn't stop. As Talbot stood the Monster slammed against the walled-up doorway. The structure held but it trembled: bricks, the door frame, even the wall itself. With a vicious snarl, the Monster stepped back and threw his shoulder against the wall. It shook again. This time even the chandelier in the center of the foyer rocked back and forth.

"You go!" Talbot said. "It's me that he wants."

"Why?"

"The last time he saw me I was attacking his master," Talbot said. "I believe the Monster still wants to save him."

"I thought you said he doesn't think like people do."

"He doesn't," Talbot said. "I told you, he protects what he cares about." Talbot looked around. "I've got to stop him from leaving the basement."

"How?"

"He's afraid of fire."

“There are matches in that box,” Caroline said, pointing toward the fireplace.

Talbot ran over.

Snarling again, the creature made a tight fist, drew his right arm back, and punched the wall. Several bricks fell out in broken chunks, followed by the Monster’s arm. Caroline held her hands to her ears to block out his awful cries.

Talbot scooped up the matches. “You go and get help,” he said to Caroline. “Bring men with torches and chains.”

“What about guns?”

“They won’t stop him,” Talbot said. “Go! Quickly!”

Caroline hesitated. She watched as the Monster punched the wall a second time. Bricks exploded into the foyer and she ducked, covering her head, as the giant forced his way through. Staggering over the rubble, he saw Talbot and stormed toward him. It was a bull-like charge, his head bent slightly, his shoulders hunched, his arms swaying in wide sweeps from side to side.

“Miss Cooke, *run!”* Talbot yelled as he snatched a small wood-handled shovel from the fireplace rack. “I’ll try to hold him back.”

Tearing off a tattered piece of his shirtsleeve, Talbot wrapped it around the bottom of the shovel and struck a match from the box. He touched the flame to the fabric and it blazed as he ran toward the Monster.

The creature stopped advancing. He staggered backward, waving his pale hands in front of his face, fearfully protecting himself from the blaze. Talbot, meanwhile, crouched and moved forward cautiously. By thrusts and inches, he pushed the Monster back toward the opening. But the makeshift torch was dying quickly.

Instead of running, Caroline glanced around the room for more kindling. There were shelves lined with books, a rug by the fireplace, and the floor-length tapestry—nothing that would help Talbot. Then she noticed a closet catty-corner to the basement door. She hurried over.

“What are you doing?” Talbot cried.

“Looking for something to burn!”

“I told you to leave!”

“I’ll go when you do,” Caroline said as she pulled open the door. She flew through the coats and jackets, looking for something that would burn.

Behind her, the Monster swiped at the fire and quickly withdrew his hand. A moment later he tried again. With each pass, steam rose from his moist flesh. As the flames died, his retreat slowed and his attacks became bolder.

“Here!” Caroline said to Talbot as she pulled an old scarf from a hanger.

She tossed the cloth to him and he wrapped it around the shovel. The garment caught fire quickly and Talbot used the blossoming flame to walk the Monster back.

Caroline looked around frantically for something else to put on the flame. As she did, the front door swung open slowly. Bright sunlight and a gusty sea breeze filled the foyer as Stephen Banning walked in.

“I kinda figgered Pratt would be bunkin’ over,” Banning said. “But how many times I gotta knock before—”

“Shut the door!” Caroline yelled as the wind dislodged burning pieces of cloth from the shovel.

“Christjesus!” Banning cried as he stood rigid from chin to heels, staring at the Monster.

“The door!” Caroline screamed. *“Close it!”*

Banning thawed. He screamed, turned, and ran, leaving the door open.

With an oath, Talbot hurried toward the door to shut it. But his sudden movement caused the flaming scarf to come apart. He stopped to keep from losing the fire entirely; as he did the Monster stomped forward, swung a powerful arm, and swatted the shovel away. It flew across the room and landed in the center of the staircase. Burning pieces of cloth were still stuck to the shovel and they licked at the hem of the tapestry.

“God, *no!”* Caroline cried as she ran over.

The dry old fabric encouraged the blaze. An instant later, with a sickening *whoosh,* the centuries-old arras was swallowed in a wave of fire.

Shouting with rage, Caroline mounted the staircase as the flames crawled up the tapestry.

“Leave it!” Talbot yelled.

Caroline ignored him.

With a glance toward the Monster, Talbot rushed to intercept her. He grabbed Caroline’s hand and pulled her down the staircase into his arms. Behind him, the Monster backed away from the rising sheet of flame.

“You can’t stay here!” Talbot yelled. “If that falls you’ll be killed!”

“Let me go! The castle—”

Talbot forced her around. He held her arms tightly and looked down into her wide eyes.

“Don’t you understand?” he yelled. “We can’t save this place alone! We have to get help!”

Caroline turned and watched as the fire raced up the fabric toward the ceiling. Within seconds, the rough-hewn timbers above began to darken. Flames found homes in the inviting old cracks and among dry splinters.

Caroline struggled. “I’ve got to reach the phone before the tapestry falls on it!”

“You’ll never make it!” Talbot admonished her.

“I’ve got to try!” she screamed.

As Caroline shouted and continued to struggle, Talbot wrapped his powerful arms around her waist and pulled her away. He circled wide around the Monster. The creature watched them, afraid to move any closer to the burning tapestry. Even as Talbot carried the struggling young woman toward the front door, the wall hanging ripped in the middle and fell across the banister. Flaming embers broke from the main body of the tapestry and landed on the writing desk. It covered the computer and telephone and set Joan Raymond’s papers ablaze. A moment later the rest of the massive tapestry fell, dropping in a great, diagonal pirouette. It fluttered over Talbot and Caroline, landing between them and the front door.

They jumped away, toward the basement; as they did, the Monster lunged toward them. He reached out with one massive hand and grabbed Talbot around the back of the neck. He squeezed.

Talbot released Caroline, who cried with fury and tried to pry the Monster’s steel fingers free. The giant casually knocked her back with his

free hand. The blow dropped her to the floor and sent her sliding toward the door. Climbing onto her knees, she looked around. There was an unburned corner of a flaming piece of tapestry nearby. She grabbed it and swung it at the creature's head. The Monster stumbled backward, still gripping Talbot. The giant waved his free hand agitatedly as Caroline whipped the flaming fabric around again. This time the flames came closer to the Monster's face, though they were still well above Talbot's head.

"Let him go, you bastard!" Caroline screamed, whipping the fiery remnant in front of her one more time.

With a cry of fear, the giant finally released his captive.

Talbot fell to his knees, gasping for breath. Caroline threw the burning piece of tapestry at the Monster. He withdrew fearfully and she helped Talbot to his feet. As soon as he was up again, Talbot spun. Leaping the burning fabric, he threw himself against the Monster's chest. The creature was knocked back, toward the basement door, though he was too large to fall in. Talbot struck him again, this time in the midsection. The Monster doubled over and Talbot pushed him back, over the rubble. The creature fell through the opening. He teetered on the ledge for a moment, then lost his footing and plunged backward, off the steps. The loud, ugly fall was followed by a splash.

Talbot turned toward Caroline. Behind her, the old desk was aflame and the air was filled with flamelets flying from the stacks of paper. Books on the shelves were beginning to smoke.

"Get out!" Talbot shouted. "I'll deal with the fire!"

"How?" she screamed. She started running across the foyer toward a door she hoped would lead to the kitchen. "If I could only find a bucket somewhere—"

Caroline had only gone a few steps when fire suddenly erupted from the spines of the dozens of old books. The glue of the newer volumes ignited and books literally exploded in a smoky fireball that rolled toward them.

Caroline twisted and fell backward and Talbot hurried toward her. He waved his hand to swat away the burning pieces of leather, cloth, and paper that swirled around them. By the time he reached the young woman she was on her side, coughing from the smoke and trying to rise.

Talbot picked Caroline up and carried her toward the door. The blaze was hot on her neck and cheek as she looked back. The fire had grown too large for them to fight. Even if there were volunteer fire fighters in LaMirada, they'd never make it here in time to save the castle.

But of course, she thought. She'd come to LaMirada wondering if she might find a new life here. Instead, in less than twenty-four hours, she'd managed to destroy what might have been her new home. The Caroline Cooke kiss-of-death luck, which had driven her to a career she hated and relationships that ended in her loving someone who didn't love her, was in full flower.

As soon as they were safely outside, Talbot put her down. Silently, they hobbled into the bright sunlight, trailed by thickening wisps of black smoke. As they did, Caroline found herself preoccupied by the same thought that must have captivated her great-aunt. A thought that had to have made it impossible for her to go back to work as an insurance investigator.

Unless someone jumped out from behind a tree and shouted "Surprise," the creatures she'd seen were real.

Real.

And everything she'd always believed about science and the supernatural, about what was possible and what was not, suddenly seemed very shaky indeed . . .

EIGHT

Caroline phoned the volunteer fire fighters from Henry Pratt's boat.

The fire brigade reached the island nearly a half hour later. The nine men and one woman worked efficiently. They were too far from the ocean so they hooked their hoses to the outdoor water tank and worked hard to save the castle. But they weren't even able to get in the front door. By the time a large fireboat arrived from Naples to pump seawater on the blaze, over an hour later, the onshore fire fighters had retreated to the dock. They remained there in constant touch with a fire-watch on the mainland, monitoring the burning debris and making sure that none of it was blown across the channel.

Resident State Trooper Matt Willis arrived shortly after the volunteers. A tall, broad-shouldered man in his late fifties, Willis parked behind Henry Pratt's boat. He greeted the fire chief and then he walked toward Caroline. She and Talbot were sitting in Pratt's express cruiser. Caroline's hands were folded in her lap. Talbot was staring blankly at the ground. Neither of them spoke.

Willis stopped in front of the young woman. His back was to the sun and he smelled of coffee and cigars. Talbot and Caroline were reflected in his dark sunglasses.

He tipped his hat at Caroline. "Are you all right, Dr. Cooke?" he asked in a heavy Southern drawl. "Either of you need medical attention?"

"We're fine," she said unconvincingly.

"I'm State Trooper Matt Willis," he said. He glanced at Talbot. "And you are?"

“My name is Talbot,” he said. He looked back down and said softly, as though he were ashamed, “Lawrence Talbot.”

Trooper Willis regarded Talbot for a moment. “I’ll get your particulars in a minute,” he said. He looked back at Caroline. “I saw you at the funeral yesterday. I’m sorry about your aunt. She was a very classy lady.”

“Thank you,” Caroline said.

“And I’m sorry about this,” he said. He cocked a callous-knuckled thumb at the blaze. “Helluva thing to have happen, though you’re both lucky to be alive.”

“I guess we are,” she said.

The state trooper lifted his sunglasses and rested them on top of his forehead. Then he turned to the castle and watched as smoke poured from the upper window of the tower, the old laboratory window. “If it’s any consolation, it wouldn’t surprise me if a lot of the superstructure survives. This place is tough. Been through storms and explosions and God knows what else. How’d it start, Dr. Cooke?”

Caroline stared ahead. Part of her wanted to tell the truth. Spit it out, then get away from here as fast as possible. Go back to her practice, back to problems she understood. But part of her also wanted to lie. She wanted to make these people go away so that she could explore the world she’d discovered here. She was a doctor, and in one evening she’d witnessed two of the most extraordinary phenomena in medical history. She’d watched a living corpse rise from decades of submersion in a lake and she’d met a man who was a—what had Pratt called it? A lycanthrope.

“Dr. Cooke?” the trooper said.

She looked up at him. “Yes?”

“How’d it start?” he repeated. He sniffed the air. “Were you cooking? There’s a real strong smell of garlic.”

“No,” Caroline said. “I wasn’t cooking.”

“Then what were you doing?”

Talbot looked up at him. “Trooper Willis, we were fighting hell with its own weapons.”

Willis’s gaze shifted to the big man. “You were . . . fighting hell.”

"Yes, sir."

"With its own weapons?"

"That's right."

"Which would be fire," Willis said.

Talbot nodded.

"I guess I'll talk to you first, Mr. Talbot. Your name doesn't ring a bell. You from around here?"

"No, sir. I was born in Britain. Wales."

Then he was *from Wales,* Caroline thought. That was another indication that Talbot knew her aunt, that he was what he said he was. There was no way she could run away from this thing now. No way at all.

"You don't sound English," Willis said.

"My mother lived in Southern California," Talbot told him. "I was raised there."

"Los Angeles?"

Talbot nodded.

Willis shifted his weight to one leg. "Where's your tan? Usually gets baked into kids out there."

"Mr. Talbot didn't get a lot of sun," Caroline said.

Willis looked at her. "Nightcrawler, huh? Not the kind of element we want in our little hamlet. How do you two know each other?"

"Mr. Talbot is a very old friend of the family."

"I see." Willis said. "You, uh—you care to clarify what your old family friend said about how the fire started?"

"Not just now. I'm not sure I could."

"You're not sure," Willis said. "Well, you probably want to wait and talk to your lawyer." He looked at the cruiser. "Henry Pratt's your lawyer, right?"

Caroline said nothing. She had known where this was going; Willis was anything but subtle. The only thing she had to decide was how much to tell him. She did not want Talbot incarcerated. If what he'd said was true about

his “curse” and the strength he possessed, he’d be better off on the island than on the mainland.

“Of course Hank’s your lawyer,” Willis continued. “Hell, he’s everyone’s lawyer in LaMirada since Tom Stevenson went to work for the town and D’Arcy Corrigan raised his rates. Where is Hank? On the other side of the castle, maybe? And what about Bill Porterhouse?”

Caroline stared out at the fireboat.

“You see, Dr. Cooke,” Willis went on, “even if this fire hadn’t happened I was going to come out and visit you. So happens that neither of those gentlemen showed up at home last—”

“Trooper Willis,” Caroline said, “let’s cut this dance short, okay? Henry Pratt and Mr. Porterhouse were killed last night.”

Willis stood up straight. His sunglasses slipped down over his eyes. “Say again?”

“There’s something in the castle,” she said, “something not human. It kept Mr. Talbot and me cornered in the basement until this morning. We were finally able to chase it away with fire.”

“Hold on,” Willis said. “Something not human? You mean like an animal or a serial killer?”

Caroline was about to answer when Talbot spoke.

“Officer, what Dr. Cooke and I encountered in the castle basement was the Frankenstein Monster.”

Willis stared at the big man. “Mr. Talbot—don’t screw around with me.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Talbot insisted. “It’s the very same creature Dr. Henry Frankenstein built on the outskirts of the Tyrolean Alps over a century ago.”

“Built?”

“That’s right,” said Talbot. “From the bodies of the dead.”

The trooper stared at them for another moment. Then he shook his head and chuckled. “Oooookay. I get it. You’re trying out a plot for a novel—like the ones your aunt used to write. And Mr. Talbot is what? Your publisher? A reporter doing a story on Joan Raymond, the next generation?”

“I wish that were the case,” she said. “But the Monster *is* in there. The fire fighters will find the creature in the basement, along with the bodies of Mr. Pratt and Mr. Porterhouse. And when they go down there, they’d better be armed.” She looked at Talbot. “With what, Lawrence? Fire?”

“Yes,” he said sullenly. “That’s the only thing the Monster fears. But even that won’t kill him.”

“I see,” Willis said. “Fire won’t kill him and he’s bullet-proof.”

“No,” Talbot told him. “Bullets penetrate his skin. He can bleed. They just don’t harm his internal organs. He seems to have the capacity to regenerate tissue, perhaps as a result of the electricity in his body.”

“Electricity—”

“That’s probably right,” Caroline said. “The electricity must stimulate his cells somehow.”

Willis exhaled through his nose. “Now look, you two. I don’t know how you’re used to doing things north of LaMirada, Dr. Cooke, but we don’t play games with the law down here.”

“I already told you we’re not playing games. When your crew gets downstairs they’re going to find an eight-foot-tall creature. And I suggest you have them bring flamethrowers or gasoline and matches because they *are* going to need them.”

Willis put his hands on his hips. “Doctor, I don’t know what you two were smokin’ in there but you’re coming to the mainland with me. I’ll have the town lawyer meet us, because I have a feeling you’re going to need—”

“Trooper Willis,” Talbot said, “before we go, there’s something else you should know.”

“No!” Caroline said. She grabbed his wrist. “Trooper Willis was right. Don’t say anything else until we’ve spoken to an attorney.”

Willis shook his head and looked out across the water. “I’ve got a feeling you two are going to give me a big pain in—aw, hell.”

Caroline followed Willis’s gaze. He was looking past them, toward the channel between La Viuda and the mainland.

“Speaking of pains,” he said. “I’ve got to get you two out of here.”

“Why?” Caroline asked.

“Because crusading Gibson Gowland of the *LaMirada Good Times Dispatch* is on his way,” Willis said. “The last thing I need are stories getting out that there’s a monster on this island.”

“The Communist press lives,” Caroline said.

“Say what you like,” Willis replied, “but a red scare in these parts almost ruined LaMirada fifty years ago. Only the red that scared people wasn’t Communists, Dr. Cooke. It was blood. A lot of it. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen again.” He started to walk away. “Wait here, please.”

“Are we under arrest?” Caroline asked.

“No,” Willis said over his shoulder. “Last time I looked the Communists were still about ninety miles south of here.” Willis shouted something to the fire chief, then hurried back to his boat to make a call. He waited for Gowland’s boat to arrive.

When he was gone, Caroline turned to Talbot. “Lawrence, you musn’t tell him that you were responsible for what happened.”

“Why not? I was.”

“I know that,” she said. “But the fire will be out soon. They’ll find the Monster and blame the murders on him. They’ll have to—there won’t be any other explanation. And you have to let them.”

“If I do that,” Talbot said, “they’ll set me free. And tonight, when the moon is full, I’ll kill again. Don’t you see? It’s better if I’m locked up. Maybe the cell has finally been built that will hold me.”

“And then tomorrow, the curse will come on even stronger,” she replied. “You said so yourself.”

Talbot looked down. He rubbed his knees anxiously.

“Anyway, I don’t want you locked up,” she said. “I want you helped. We’ll get you to a clinic, find a way to sedate you—”

“I don’t want to be sedated!” he cried. “Don’t you understand? I don’t *want* to live. Even if you could cure me I’ve got blood on my hands.” He opened them and stared down at his fingers. After a moment he looked over at Caroline. “But before I die, I want to try to atone for some of the suffering I’ve caused. I want to make sure that at least the Monster is destroyed.”

“The fire fighters will see to that,” Caroline said.

“No,” Talbot said. “We need to go in with someone who can use the terminals on the Monster’s neck to drain his energy.”

“You mean those two silver bolts?”

“Yes,” said Talbot. “I know you have to connect the minus pole to the minus pole, but I don’t know which one is which.”

“And that will kill the Monster?”

“It’s the first step,” Talbot replied. “His nervous system will cease to function. After that he can be dissected, something that should have been done decades ago. When that’s done I’ll find a weapon made of silver. Then I’ll need your help using it—”

“Absolutely not,” Caroline said.

“But you *must—”*

“You weren’t responsible for all those killings,” she said. “I’ll help you to deal with that, but not through death.”

Talbot was about to protest but Caroline hushed him. Trooper Willis had finished speaking with Gibson Gowland and was starting back down the dock. He was talking on his cellular phone.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Caroline said to Talbot. “Right now I want you to do for me what you did for my aunt. I want you to trust me. Can you do that? *Will* you do that?”

“But you don’t understand,” Talbot said. “When the full moon rises I’ll kill again. Perhaps I’ll even attack you. I’m drawn to kill those who are closest to me. That’s part of the curse.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Caroline said. “I’m a doctor. I’ve seen medicine do powerful things, things you never dreamed of. Give me the chance to try and help you, Lawrence. I don’t want your blood on my hands.”

Talbot hesitated for a long moment. Finally, he nodded.

“Good,” she said. “So we’ll have no more talk of silver weapons. Not a word. Understand?”

He nodded again as Trooper Willis returned.

“Well, I’ll say this for young Gowland,” Willis said. “He’s smart enough to know that you cover a murder to sell papers, but you leave out the really

scary stuff. Otherwise folks flee and you have nobody left to read the paper. Come on."

"Where to?" Caroline asked.

"My little corner of LaMirada," Willis said. "I just spoke with Tom Stevenson's secretary. Tom's the town attorney and also the local pro bono man. He'll come to the office when he gets out of court."

"When will that be?" Caroline asked.

"He had a morning session—should be back before noon. Until the fire fighters are inside the castle and can see what's what, he'll make sure you're treated without prejudice, as they say in the law business."

"All right," Caroline said as they followed him toward his four-seater.

Though the trooper offered Caroline the seat beside him, she elected to sit in the back next to Talbot. When the engine started up she found that it was surprisingly quiet back there. That was due, she realized, to the Plexiglas shell that prevented prisoners from jumping overboard. She spotted a pair of wading boots under the seat and asked the trooper if the barefoot Talbot could borrow them. He said all right.

Caroline glanced at Talbot as he put the boots on. She was struck by his composure now, by the contrast between the peaceful man he seemed to be by nature and the ferocious thing that nature had made him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He sat up and nodded once.

"What were you thinking?"

He took a long breath. "You don't really want to know."

"Sure I do," she said. "One thing you'll learn about me is that I don't say what I don't mean. You seemed far away. Where?"

He looked out at the bay. "I was back in California."

"A happier time, I'm sure," she said. She took his hand in hers.

Talbot looked at her and smiled. "Do you want to hear something funny?"

"Please," Caroline said.

"When I was living in California I had a letter from my father's solicitor. He said he was also representing a gentleman who was buying property

near my mother's home in North Hollywood. Seven acres up in the hills, on a wooded peak. The solicitor wanted to know if his client could call on me if he needed anything. That 'gentleman' was Count Dracula. I wrote back that I'd be happy to help the Count in any way I could. He sounded very cultured, a little eccentric, very European—an interesting man to know."

"Did you meet him then?"

Talbot shook his head. "I'm not sure that he ever even came there. Perhaps he was looking for a haven in the event of war. I don't know." Talbot looked down again. "He always plans ahead, and he's ruthless. That's how he's managed to survive."

Caroline squeezed his hand. "The moral of the story is that a title and fancy clothes do not a refined person make. Speaking of appearances, how does the world look after one's been away for fifty years?"

Talbot looked up. "You know—I hadn't really noticed."

"You hibernate for half a century and then you don't see the world when you awake?"

"I know that sounds strange," Talbot said. "But when your nights are crowded with heightened sounds and smells, all you want to do during the day is retreat from your senses . . . if you can understand that."

"I think I can," Caroline said, "and I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't be crowding you like this."

"It's all right," he said. "Now that you mention it, it is a very interesting question. In California I worked for an optical company. Back then I was always thinking about the future, trying to imagine what wonders there would be."

"What did you think it would be like?"

He brightened a little. "Oh, I thought there would be things like flying cars and robots and rockets to the moon."

Caroline smiled back. "Well, humans *have* been to the moon. We also have planes—shuttles, we call them—that travel into outer space. And we have robots. They're not humanoid, the way you might have pictured them, but there are automated machines that build cars and do our banking and even explore other planets for us."

“Then I don’t understand,” Talbot said, “why I don’t *feel* as if anything has really changed. Clothes, attitudes, places like this where people have closed minds. We always thought that things would be better in the future. That people would be wiser and more compassionate.”

“Well, there’s the catch,” Caroline said. “As the universe got smaller I guess we all started feeling a little crushed together. Brutalized. And I think people pushed back, became more intolerant.”

Talbot sighed. “I understand how intolerance can hurt a person.”

“I take it you’re speaking from experience?”

Talbot grinned self-consciously. “You don’t really want to hear about that.”

“I do,” she insisted.

Talbot found another little smile for her. “You’re a kind girl.”

“And you’re politically incorrect, though I’ll break you of that naïve charm before we’re through. Let me guess. Does intolerance have anything to do with why you were in California?”

Talbot nodded. “My father’s family disapproved of his second wife. My mother was an American actress. She was appearing in London in a play while my father was still mourning the death of his first wife. He married her not long before I was born, and she went back to California shortly thereafter.”

“With or without you?”

“Initially, without me,” he said. “I spent summers with my mother, but my father wanted me to be raised in the castle in Llanwelly Village where five generations of Talbots had lived.” He snickered bitterly. “I tried to be a Talbot. But my older stepbrother, John, regarded me as a bastard—”

“Though you weren’t.”

“No, I wasn’t. And he also saw me as a threat. He was very serious and harsh with the people who worked at the estate. I was easygoing and I knew how to have a good time. He was an outdoorsman who had no patience for books and I loved reading, learning. My father wasn’t strong enough to stand up to him. I was sent to boarding school in London and visited the estate on weekends. It was a terrible, lonely life.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Finally, when I was fourteen, my brother insisted that I go and live with my mother and my father obliged. I was hurt but I really didn’t mind. I was happy in Southern California. We lived modestly and my mother worked regularly in motion pictures as an extra. When she died, I remained in Los Angeles.”

“Did you see your father at all during that time?”

“No,” Talbot said. “We exchanged letters.”

“Why did you finally go back?”

“When I was thirty-one, John was killed in a hunting accident on the grounds. My father asked me to return and take my place as heir. This may sound cruel, but I went back and for the first time I really *enjoyed* being there. Though my father wasn’t an affectionate man I was happy with the prospect of having him to myself.”

“That doesn’t sound cruel at all,” Caroline said. “I understand how you must have felt.”

Talbot’s smile broadened. “That wasn’t the only thing that made me happy.” He was staring off now, at something only he could see. “My father had this magnificent reflecting telescope in his attic. In California, I used to look at the stars with a sense of wonder. In Llanwelly Village, I used it to spy on beautiful women with a greater sense of wonder. It’s ironic, isn’t it, that I was always quite the wolf.”

Caroline didn’t find it ironic. If she were a psychiatrist, that’s an avenue she’d have pursued.

“I met my beautiful Gwen Conliffe that way,” Talbot continued. The smile quivered around the edges. “Then came the awful night when I was out with Gwen and her friend Jenny Williams. We’d gone to a Gypsy camp to have our fortunes told. Gwen and I walked off and Jenny was attacked by a wolf—only it wasn’t a real wolf. It was Bela the Gypsy—a werewolf.”

Caroline noticed Trooper Willis cock his ear back. She motioned for Talbot to lower his voice. Talbot fell silent.

“No, go on,” Caroline urged. “Just quieter. Please, Lawrence?”

“All right,” he said, “but only if you call me Larry.”

“All right, Larry,” she said. She scooted closer to him, their thighs touching. “I want to hear more.”

Talbot breathed deeply. “When Jenny screamed I ran to help her. I struck the wolf with my walking stick. As I did, he bit me.” Talbot absently rubbed his chest, just above his heart. “Bela died, but not before passing along his curse. After that, I no longer looked at the stars and the moon with a sense of wonder. They were merely another reminder of what I had become. After that, women were no longer objects of admiration and respect. They were simply prey.”

Caroline touched his arm. “Wasn’t there anyone who could help you? Didn’t you see doctors?”

“I saw doctors. I saw countless doctors, the best in Europe. The best in the *world.* They tried to cure me with surgery. They tried medicines, electricity, even fungus. Nothing worked.”

“As I said, medicine has come a very long way since then,” Caroline told him. “There are new tests, new drugs, new ways of treating all kinds of maladies. I’m sure others have told you this, but there are a number of possible explanations for your condition. Congenital hairy nevus, for one.”

“Which is?”

“A form of cancer that causes hair to grow all over the body.”

“Cancer,” Talbot said. “Then—there’s no hope.”

“To the contrary,” Caroline said. “Fighting cancer is one of the areas where we’ve made considerable progress. We can control congenital hairy nevus, for example, by surgically implanting sacs filled with a saline solution. It causes the cancerous skin to die and new, healthy skin to grow in its place. Back in school one of my professors was also conducting research into congenital generalized hypertrichosis. That’s an extremely rare genetic trait transmitted, it’s thought, through the X chromosome. People who have this disorder experience an out-of-control growth of bodily hair, especially on the face and chest. In the past, these people usually landed in carnival sideshows as ape-boys and that sort of thing. My professor believed that the trait was an important part of our proto-human past, one that was vestigial in most modern-day humans. He found a way to trigger an ‘off-switch’ and shut down the condition.”

“None of my family suffered from these things,” Talbot said.

“Perhaps they did and didn’t know they had it,” Caroline replied. “Or maybe you just didn’t know it. Decades ago, those kinds of afflictions were kept secret, especially among the gentry.”

“But I didn’t have this condition all my life,” Talbot said. “It happened after Bela bit me.”

“Maybe the condition was latent,” Caroline suggested. “It could have been a proclivity toward CGH which was triggered by suggestion, by the belief that Bela was a werewolf, or by the presence of wolfbane.”

“And the moon?” he asked. “It causes the change. That’s not something I imagine.”

“The moon could have a gravitational impact on the fluid of the inner ear,” Caroline said. “The moon does that with certain forms of lunacy. This miniature tidal effect, combined with luminosity, might even have had a subtle hypnotic impact. I’m curious. Was there any kind of folklore attached to the moon and your condition?”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “In fact, I was surprised that everyone in Llanwelly Village knew the verse.”

“Providing more subconscious reinforcement of your condition,” she said. “What was the saying?”

Talbot turned his face to the sky. Like a man reciting his own execution order, he said, “ ‘Even a man who’s pure at heart and says his prayers by night, may become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright.’ ”

“I see,” Caroline said. “But it’s summer.”

“I know,” Talbot replied. “There are inconsistencies.”

“What other ones?” Caroline asked.

“For one thing,” Talbot said, “Bela became a four-legged wolf, not a two-legged one. And from what his mother, Maleva, told me, the moon had to be entirely full to affect him. I change the day before fullness as well as the day after.”

“You feel equally driven and ferocious then?”

Talbot nodded.

“So there *are* customized aspects of your condition,” she said. “It’s not a viral disease like measles or chicken pox where the symptoms and manifestations are more or less constant.”

“No,” Talbot admitted. “But what does all that mean? The condition isn’t in my head. You saw.”

“Oh, it’s very real,” Caroline said. “But in connection with a genetic proclivity, the transformation may be triggered by your deep belief in it, by anticipation. A sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Talbot regarded Caroline a moment longer. Then he looked past her. He still seemed to be unaware of the warm sun, of the fresh spray of sea air. He seemed oblivious to any mortal pleasure.

“Suppose you’re correct,” he said, “and the condition is partly physical and partly psychological. What can you do today? Tonight? I don’t want to go through the transformation again. I don’t want to kill.”

“If this lawyer they’ve gotten for us is any good,” Caroline said, “maybe he’ll let me prescribe something for you. A strong sedative to put you out. We’ll incarcerate you as well, just in case. In the morning I’ll see if we can get you into the LaMirada Clinic. When I first started thinking about moving my practice down here, I checked up on it. It’s a top-of-the-line facility for the treatment of substance abuse.”

“Substance abuse?”

“Drugs and alcohol,” she said. “Problems that still plague us in the so-called enlightened and health-conscious nineteen nineties. They have state-of-the-art equipment at the clinic, including rooms that are a whole lot stronger than my great-aunt’s basement. They take emergency cases, and certainly you would qualify. Starting tomorrow, we can extract DNA from your blood and begin doing linkage analysis. Find a means of suppressing your physical reactions.”

Talbot shook his head. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Not easy,” she said. “But do-able. You’ve got to believe that.”

“I want to,” Talbot said, “but I’ve been disappointed so often.”

“I understand,” Caroline said. “But Dr. Cooke is on the case and I promise you, she can be very, very tenacious.”

Talbot smiled warmly as the boat neared the shore. A few minutes later they were climbing into Trooper Willis's car.

As they pulled away from the wharf, Caroline glanced back at the island. She watched as dark smoke churned from the windows of the Tombs, blighting the perfect blue sky. Her confidence in being able to treat Talbot was tempered by what had happened at the castle the night before, by the very vivid memory of the thing that Talbot had become. Despite the sophistication of medical science, she was keenly aware of fact that there were always unknowns. Surprises. And though she had given Talbot hope, there was still one thing that bothered her:

What if she was wrong about his condition?

What if Lawrence Talbot was exactly what he said he was?

NINE

The gentle tingling of the ring startled him.

On nights like this, when the moon was full but his blighted soul was empty, he sat on his torchlit veranda. There, surrounded by quiet and serenity, he was brushed by warm breezes and warmer thoughts of a time when existence had a purpose. His memories drifted back more than five hundred years, when he had raised a blood-smeared smallsword and led his people, the Szecklers of Wallachia, to victory against overwhelming armies from the north and south.

After his father was murdered early in the war, young Vlad realized that he could not afford to show his enemies charity or mercy. Certainly they would not show mercy to him if he were taken prisoner. Thus, like his ancestor, the Hun Attila, the teenage warrior would capture pockets of conscripts and burn them alive at the stake. Then he would leave their bodies where other conscripts were certain to find them. But this tactic was only moderately effective. Death by fire took just fifteen minutes—less if the victims had been able to secure gunpowder. Tucked in packets and hidden upon their bodies—within the armpits was a favored spot, for it was close to the heart and lungs—the powder ignited and killed prisoners quickly. There wasn't enough time for their screams to reach the ears of their comrades. Not enough horror for those soldiers to gaze on when they arrived. Vlad decided then that the stakes could be used more effectively not to burn the enemies of his people but to impale them. Stripped naked and forced to sit on a sharpened, greased pike until it penetrated the breastbone, death came slower to the individual. Their shrieks lasted longer. It was far more daunting for someone to find a corpse still red with blood,

perhaps even still alive, than to find a blackened mound of bones and sinew. However foul the smell of the charred flesh.

Because of the stakes, he—Prince Vlad—came to be known as Vlad Tepes. Vlad the Impaler. His reputation for sadism spread faster than the blood he spilled, though his guiding principle was not cruelty. It was leadership. If his enemies had not been afraid of him, the Szecklers would have been destroyed long before he was forced to forsake them. And if the Szecklers had not feared his wrath more than they feared the enemy, many would not have stood fast against superior forces. A warrior who was not motivated by courage had to be motivated by fear. Fear of punishment, which was greater than the fear of death or battlefield wounds.

In the end, Vlad's so-called Reign of Blood secured peace for his people. Yet there was no peace for the prince. Vlad worried what would happen if he were ever succeeded by one who lacked his resolve. So he journeyed to Scholomance, a small, hidden university of the dark arts, to learn if there were some way to forestall death. He studied necromancy and the language of animals. He learned alchemy and the black arts. His diligence was such that he came to the attention of the mysterious headmaster, a cloaked figure who moved about only at night. Though the eerie pedant spoke all languages, he said little.

Then, one night, when Vlad was alone in the dark library of the school, the shadowy headmaster approached. In a deep, whispered voice he offered the Wallachian what he desired: immortality.

Vlad was amazed but not surprised. *What must I do for this?* he asked.

He was informed, still in a whisper, that all he needed to do was accept it.

Five centuries later he could still hear himself reply, *If that is all, master, then I accept. What fool would not?*

The headmaster replied, *What fool would not.*

He gave Vlad a ring made of black ivory and bade him put it on and kiss it. Vlad obeyed. Then the headmaster lifted his head and Vlad could see his chiseled beard and thin smile. And the Devil himself said quietly, sibilantly, *Tonight you have made a pact with me, Vlad Tepes. When you leave this chamber, it will be as one of the fanged predators of the earth.*

Headmaster, I don't understand, the young student replied—so very young and so very naïve.

The Devil's smile deepened. *I remain immortal by consuming the souls of the damned. You will survive by drinking the blood of innocents. They will become the damned. They will become mine.*

No— Vlad had protested. He rose from his seat and held out his hands, imploring. *Please, no!*

Henceforth, said the immutable fiend, *you will shun the sun and the symbols of my enemies. Your familiars will be those predators of earth and the mists of my own abode. If you fail to obey, your own soul will serve me in the pits of Hell.* The Devil laughed then. *That, Vlad Tepes, is a fate you will find more disagreeable than undeath . . . as a vampire.*

Vlad looked with disbelief from the Devil to the ring. With mounting horror, which he could still feel to this day, he tugged the ring off. Carved on the inside of the band were the words of indenture the Devil had uttered. On the front was a design, which Vlad also examined for the first time. It was a crest, one which thenceforth would be his. A shield with a ***D*** in the center and two crowns on either side. Above it was a larger crown beneath which was a bat with its wings outstretched. It was the crest of the Devil's Son. It was the seal of Dracula.

Seeing the crest and realizing what he had done, Vlad Tepes screamed. It was the last mortal sound he would ever make. For even as he cried out, his tongue became parched and his teeth began to throb against his gums. He grew sickly cold all over, save for the heat in his throat and the longing in his mouth. Thirsty beyond anything he had experienced before, he ran from the library and claimed his first victim, a milkmaid who had been unable to sleep and had gone for a walk.

Her last walk.

Count Dracula's dark brow knitted now as he looked at the ring. It was one of two things he owned from those long-ago days. The other was the smallsword with which he'd fought the enemies of his people. He'd stolen it from the Visaroff Museum in Transylvania after recognizing it during a recent visit there. Upon returning to his estate, he had entrusted the blade to

his devoted manservant, Andre. The *sarpe* carried it to protect his master and also as a symbol of the authority he wielded over his own kind.

A sword is my salvation, a ring my damnation, he thought ironically as he regarded the ring. The infernal crest was flat black, a sinister contrast to the vampire's black dinner jacket and trousers, which gleamed in the moonlight. His mind left the past, which could not be changed, and moved to the future, which could. There was only one reason the ivory would tingle. Over a half century before, Count Dracula had used the ring to pass some of his own life force to the ailing body of the Frankenstein Monster. The arc between donor and recipient could only be broken by the death of the latter. Since Count Dracula had never felt any further drain on the ring, he'd assumed the Monster had somehow perished that night at Mornay Castle. He thought that perhaps the too-clever Professor Stevens had used the journal of Dr. Frankenstein to dissect the brute. Apparently he had not. The tingling indicated that the Monster had survived somehow and was seeking strength. And the laboratory Dracula had built here, in hopeful expectation of this day, would not go to waste.

The vampire's upper lip curled slightly, exposing the long white canines. He had needed the Monster back then. Doctors Van Helsing and Jeffrey Garth and their newly formed League of Anti-Diabolists had become relentless in their search for the vampire's coffin. Count Dracula had feared that they would find his soil and satin resting place and send him to eternal damnation. The vampire had needed a tireless guard, and he had worked with Dr. Mornay to give the Monster an obedient brain. It was an effort that that accursedly self-righteous Wolf Man had foiled.

What a foolish mistake we made, Count Dracula thought. He and Dr. Mornay should have replaced the brain of the sanctimonious Talbot with that of the compliant Wilbur Grey. What a dogged guardian the Wolf Man would have been.

Count Dracula often wondered what had become of his old nemesis. Like him, the Wolf Man was not subject to the natural laws of death and decay. Even if his mortal form died, it would be reborn during the full moon. Dracula had no difficulty imagining Talbot still searching for him, still yearning to atone for the blood on his own lips by destroying the vampire.

Dracula would have slain the cur the last time they met, if only it hadn't been so close to sunrise and he'd had time to find something made of silver.

Count Dracula looked down. There was an ivory-white arm in his lap. The woman who owned it had been leaning against him as she gasped her life away. Now that her pulse had finally stopped throbbing, the vampire picked up the arm and laid it aside. The woman's lean, bloodless body followed it with a thump to the planks of the portico. The vampire peered into the night.

The Anti-Diabolists. The Wolf Man. The Monster. Count Dracula had thought he was done with them all. Doctors Van Helsing and Garth were surely dead by now. The Wolf Man had wanted to die; perhaps he had succeeded. But the Monster—the Monster was alive!

The percussion of old ambition returned loudly. Not just the desire to survive. Count Dracula no longer needed the Monster for that. Here on Marya Island, midway between Key West and Havana in the Morgan Islands, the vampire had no need of another guardian. His estate was located more than three and a half miles from the nearest shore, in the jungle-thick foothills of Mt. Mord. Unlike himself, who had to be bidden to enter a place, people could come into his home—if they got that far. Should anyone approach the estate, the vampire would be warned by a native population that feared the black arts and revered its practitioners. And then his slaves or his trained wolf pack would attack the intruder. Sometimes Dracula himself would go forth and greet the tourists. Invariably they were journalists seeking exiled political figures, psychologists researching voodoo, or military officers hoping to train an army in secret. To him, if he hadn't yet fed, they were the evening's bill of fare. If he'd already eaten and could take no more, he would invite them to his home where he kept them until the following night. Because of the skyscraping peaks of Mt. Mord, the sun set early and Dracula was free to leave from his coffin before dark. Many of his most cherished encounters occurred during those twilight hours, when the unwary thought the only dangers were clouds of black flies or venomous snakes.

But while Count Dracula was perfectly safe, he was not content. As the ring continued to tingle, the vampire's mind returned to the old war. Not the

battle with his personal enemies. The war against the new oppressors of Wallachia.

“Andre, come here.”

A tall, bald, shirtless man came through the open double doors. He moved slowly as though in a dream, his eyes wide and unblinking. His bare feet hardly made a sound as he walked past the mansion’s plain white columns. His thickly muscled arms swung easily beside him. The silver smallsword he wore through a loop in his belt gleamed brightly in the moonlight.

Andre was the one who had brought Dracula this woman, a student who had been doing a doctoral thesis on the history of sugar cane. Andre was one of eleven *sarpe* who dwelt on the estate. They were zombies, the animated dead who had been raised from the grave over sixty years before by a *houngan,* a voodoo priest. Once resurrected, the *sarpe* responded only to their leader. Without one, they would collapse and revive when the fragmented memories of what they were rose from the mists of the past. And they would become that again, imperfectly, until they could be decapitated. Andre had been a murderous smuggler and was the ideal bodyguard. If anything ever happened to him—and there was always the chance that a fire or an accident at the mill could destroy him—the vampire would be without his bodyguard and manservant.

Andre stopped a respectful distance from where the vampire was sitting. His eyes were dry and disinterested.

“Take her,” the vampire said without looking down. His manner was imperious, his accent thick with his proud Wallachian ancestry.

“Yes, Master.”

The servant picked up the slender body in jeans and a halter top. The pale, glassy-eyed youth would carry it to the swamp and make certain that she was never found. The authorities would see to it that whoever came looking for her would receive no help. Count Dracula paid them well from his account in London.

“Before you leave,” said Count Dracula, “have Maurice ready the boat for a trip to the Continent.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Be sure there are two coffins onboard and that Maurice brings proper documentation from the governor.”

“I will, Master.”

The vampire continued to gaze at the foliage as Andre walked off with the dead woman in his arms. From the corner of his eye he saw a large, mottled gray underwing moth bat toward the light. With an easy snap of his elbow he caught the insect by pinching its wing. The moth struggled violently as Count Dracula rose. He held the insect inches from his face.

“If I let you go,” he said, “you will die in the flames of the torch. Yet you struggle. Perhaps only vermin can appreciate the beauty to be found in death.”

The vampire regarded the moth a moment longer and then released it. The insect fluttered away quickly. It circled the flame once and darted closer. Then it wobbled and dropped to the ground. Its wings moved sluggishly for a few beats before stopping.

Count Dracula seemed sad. “The soil offers you eternal peace,” he said softly. “For me, the earth I rest upon is a reminder of a vanished home, a lost life.” The black leather of his shoes crunched sharply as he stood. He pulled his shoulders erect and made a fist. His strong chin rose along with the bold profile of his nose. “But a Szeckler does not lament. He acts. And the time has come to resume an old crusade, and this time to win it.”

His soul filled with fire, Count Dracula closed his eyes. In his mind he saw a large black bat. The creature was a vision made of mind and spirit. It left the portico and flew across jungle and sea. It flapped low over the breakers and came to rest on a patch of overgrown land. There, in the shadow of a dark stone edifice, the wings became a cape and the ribs became fingers. The tiny legs grew long and sturdy as the black silhouette of the bat became the black silhouette of a man. The man looked down at a small stone marker.

Come, the vampire commanded silently. *Come here.*

After a long moment, he heard a small, raspy female voice reply, *“Yes . . . Master.”*

The Monster’s body was too weak, his brain too simple, to respond to a command across so many miles. But there was another who would answer

the call of the vampire. One who had been waiting for him. One who for a short time had been his.

One who would serve him again after a too-long rest.

TEN

Everything had been black. Blacker than the mind dared to imagine.

And it had been damp. Moisture was everywhere. It was on her pale flesh and on her white dress. It was in her matted black hair and even under her eyelids and long fingernails.

And there were things. Warm, wet, wriggling things. She felt the small creatures squirming all over her from the moment she heard the voice. They were on her pale lips and in her nostrils when she drew a sharp, sudden breath. They slipped inside her dry mouth as she opened it slowly and uttered her first, raspy words—

"Yes . . . Master."

They wriggled on her hands and forehead as she lay there for a moment, adjusting to a different kind of blackness. A blackness in which you can feel and smell, hear and think, but not see. She lay there trying to grasp what she'd been told to do. Then she heard it again, that familiar voice.

Come . . .

She raised her hands. Countless things slid from her hands and from her white sleeves. She felt them crawl under her back and along her bare shoulders as she moved, but she ignored them. She splayed her fingers and raised them and put them stiffly against the satin just inches above her face. It was odd to experience touch again, to feel. She pushed on the lid of the coffin.

The old fabric tore easily beneath her palms. The rending sound was exciting, like clothing being pulled away before an incision could be made. It brought back memories of living organs being removed. Of screams. Of blood. Her heart beat quicker and now she heard that too. Beneath the satin

above, her hands encountered metal. She felt around with the tips of her fingers. She hesitated. Her mind and her body didn't seem to be her own.

Come to me . . .

"Yes, Master."

There was no question about obeying. *He* had spoken. Memories returned quickly now. She remembered the night that the insurance investigator had arrived looking for the Frankenstein Monster. Joan Raymond, her name was. She remembered telling Count Dracula that they had to cancel the operation, that she didn't want to be found out and arrested. She remembered insisting that her will was as strong as the vampire's, that he could not force her to do his bidding.

She curled her fingertips inward and dug her nails into the smooth surface. She would have to go through the metal. The metal resisted. She pushed harder. She felt the lid begin to bulge where she was pressing. She pushed harder still. A moment later her nails punctured the metal. She pushed her long fingers through and felt the cool, damp, refreshing soil beyond.

The soil of my grave, she thought. The only place where she had ever known peace. Peace from her critics and from persecution. But now it was time to leave the grave and the dreamless state in which she had existed for so long. It was time to finish her work.

She bent her fingers and pulled down. The metal came toward her. Particles of dirt showered through the finger-holes. Turning her elbows toward the sides, she pulled outward. More earth fell in as the metal ripped in the center. She withdrew her fingers from the holes and peeled the lid back. Soil poured down in sheets, filling her mouth and covering her face, neck, and shoulders. She ignored it, even as it filled her mouth. She moved her arms, pushing through the dirt as though she were a swimmer beginning a breaststroke. When her arms were directly above her, she raked them outward until they were lying on top of the coffin. Then she extended her fingers and grabbed the sides of the lid.

Come . . . come . . .

She pushed down hard with her hands, wrists, and arms. The sides of the coffin creaked as she sat up. She twisted her head so it would fit through the

opening she'd torn in the lid. More of the cold earth spilled around her. She sat with great effort and then she reached up again. Her hands moved like spades through the damp soil. Bent beneath the weight of the falling earth, she rose slowly—first to her knees, then to her feet. Dirt fell along her back, and when she straightened it poured down even faster. When the shower finally stopped she was standing immobile, surrounded by the cool earth, her arms straight above her. Then she turned them like an exotic dancer, writhing through the soil and loosening the dirt.

Her left hand was slightly higher than the right. Her fingers touched a meshwork of roots. She worked her fingertips through the tangled canopy, slipping them through the tendrils and into the hard-packed soil above. Then, with a final push, she broke through to the fresh air. She forced her right hand through the roots and dirt and stretched her fingers toward the sky. The air felt even better than the soil had when she pushed through the coffin lid.

As her palms worked up through the surface, she began wrigging her shoulders and rotating her hips. Earth shifted around her, some of it rising and some of it falling into the now-empty coffin. She stepped on the dirt as it collected beneath her like silt. Her forearms worked through the roots and broke the surface. She placed them flat on the warm earth and spread her fingers again. She pushed down with her newfound strength until the top of her head emerged. She turned her face upward. Scraped and jabbed by roots, it broke free of the earth. It was followed by her neck and shoulders. She continued to push until her torso and waist cleared the grave. Then she slumped forward, though she didn't rest. There had been rest enough. The dirt and living things fell from her as she clawed along the sliding carpet of earth. Upon reaching solid ground, she rose unsteadily. Her legs buckled, unused to her weight, and she dropped to her knees. Silently, dirt and worms tumbling from her open mouth, she stood again on her bare feet. This time she wavered but did not fall. And for the first time in fifty years, Sandra Mornay opened her eyes.

She looked through the matted tangle of hair and dirt. Above her, the sky was a dark, dark blue. To the west, the sun had set behind the castle. And before her was the black shape of a man. The man didn't move or speak, yet she heard and understood his wishes.

“Yes, Master,” she said slowly. “I will find him.”

She took a step and waited until she felt confident. Then she took another step. Then another and another. Her white burial gown trailing behind her, the black-haired woman with alabaster flesh glided through the garden toward the castle. Dirt and maggots fell piecemeal from her as she made her way to a gnarled old tree. She looked out from the family cemetery, out at the castle that had once been hers. She noticed thin clouds of smoke drifting from the windows. There had been a terrific fire here. She felt the disaster in the smouldering timbers . . . and in her bones.

Her bones and not her soul. What had happened to her soul? Had he *taken it, or had she lost it years before?*

Her eyes moved slowly from the low rocks to the high tower. How well she remembered this place. From here she could see the cove where she and the Master first examined the weakened Frankenstein Monster and decided to move ahead with the operation. She saw the laboratory where she had worked to provide it with a new brain. She saw the clearing beneath the window where she had been thrown by the creature, then lay feigning death. She saw the postern into which she’d crawled to escape the blazing rays of the sun.

She remembered the undertaker who had tried to embalm her, and his appalled reaction when she awoke. But the poor man’s shock had lasted only for a moment, until she could hypnotize him into interring her as she was—in a closed coffin, to protect her from the sun. She remembered shutting her eyes then and the Master commanding her to sleep.

Go, the silent voice urged her now. *He needs you again.*

“He, Master?” she asked.

The Frankenstein Monster, she heard in her mind. *Find him, Dr. Mornay. Care for him.*

“Yes, Master,” she said.

Ducking stiffly beneath the tree, the lean, ghostly figure moved toward the castle with halting steps.

Behind her, the black silhouette vanished.

ELEVEN

The morning did not go as Caroline Cooke had planned.

Trooper Willis had driven quickly down the quiet streets of LaMirada, streets with quaint names like Market Street and Blue Room Place. As they drove, Talbot seemed confused by the computers and revealing beach fashions they'd seen in the store windows and by the small, sleek cars they'd passed on the road. Cars with unfamiliar names like Toyota and filling stations with names like Exxon. When they'd stopped at a traffic light, the rap music they'd heard coming from another car baffled him completely.

"I'm not sure I belong here," he said sadly.

The state police station was more comforting to him. It was located in a corner of the mid-nineteenth-century town hall. The three-story brick building was a small, charming rectangle with a courtyard in the center and a bell tower that was used to call people to meetings. Though the stone fountain in the courtyard was shabby from disuse and the walks around it covered with weeds, Talbot smiled when he saw it through a window. Perhaps *because* it was dead and overgrown, Caroline thought.

Upon reaching the state police office, Caroline asked if she could use the phone. Her parents were driving home from the funeral and wouldn't be home yet. But in case they read about the castle fire in the newspaper or heard about it on the radio, she wanted to leave a message letting them know she was all right. Willis directed her to a pay phone in the corner of the station house. Talbot went with her; he seemed confused by the charge card and push buttons.

After Caroline placed her call, Willis introduced them to Deputy Trooper David Clyde. The short, slightly pudgy officer came from behind his

gunmetal desk near the door. He told them to make themselves comfortable on the wooden bench beneath the bright bay window. He said that they might be there for a while.

"Why is that?" Caroline asked, her expression showing concern.

"Your attorney, Tom Stevenson, had to go to court this morning to defend the city against a sanitation worker who refused to pick up bags of garbage that dogs had soiled," he said. "Mr. Stevenson doesn't get very many of those defining issue cases, trying to decide whether dog poop is the responsibility of the Department of Sanitation or the Department of Health. Problem is, the head of the Department of Sanitation, Stanley Ridges, is also a volunteer fire fighter. He's out on La Viuda and won't be back till God knows when."

"Then why can't we see Mr. Stevenson now?" Caroline asked.

"Because the judge wants this issue settled today," Clyde said. "It's summertime and he doesn't want those street muffins stinking up the street."

Talbot clearly failed to grasp the significance of the debate. So did Caroline. However, there was nothing to do but wait and hope that Stevenson got there before too long.

Trooper Willis went directly to his glassed-in cubicle across from the small holding cell. As he put in a call to the state police barracks in Naples, Deputy Trooper Clyde showed Talbot and Caroline to a bench. He asked if they wanted anything to drink or read. They both declined, though before sitting Talbot took a trooper coat from the rack and folded it into a cushion for Caroline. Clyde seemed as though he wanted to object, but he didn't. After a moment's reflection he even offered Talbot a white prison shirt to replace the tattered one he had on. Talbot gratefully accepted.

Caroline curled up on the bench beside Talbot. Though she was tired she wasn't sleepy. As she lay there, she listened as Willis reported the fire and the possibility that there may have been homicides on the island. He also said he'd be e-mailing over some data he wanted them to check. Caroline could just imagine what it was:

Who is Lawrence Talbot and did his family ever live in Southern California or in Wales, England?

She hoped the trooper would learn that Talbot had returned to England over a half century ago. It would not only present Willis with the puzzle of his career but it would also vindicate Caroline's faith in what Talbot had told her.

While everyone did their jobs, it was heartbreaking for Caroline to watch Lawrence Talbot's minute-by-minute decay. Heartbreaking and also frustrating because there was nothing she could do to help him. Ironically, he reminded her very much of Harry Haller, the hero of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf.* Like Haller, Talbot was the Wolf of the Steppes. A desolate loner. An idealistic man totally overwhelmed by his miserable fate.

For the first hour, Talbot sat quietly beside her. He was slumped on the bench, his big hands in his lap. He accepted tea when Deputy Trooper Clyde offered it, but he drank very little. He glanced at the *LaMirada Good Times Dispatch* on the reception table, but only for a moment. He spent more and more time looking at the big round wall clock located to their right, just outside the small holding cell. As the morning and then the early afternoon dragged by, he spent more time watching the clock than not. By this time Caroline was also getting anxious. She calculated that they only needed two hours from the time Stevenson arrived to convince him to let her take Talbot to the clinic and then "secure him for the night," as she had begun to think of it. They still had time—though the comfort zone was shrinking.

Stevenson finally called from the courthouse shortly after one-thirty to say that Mr. Ridges had finally arrived and that the hearing would begin after the judge got back from lunch. He told Deputy Clyde that he expected to be at the station no later than three o'clock.

Caroline was glad to hear that. It would be close, but that would still leave them enough time.

Talbot, clearly, was not so sure. After Stevenson's call he leaned close to Caroline. There was a fearful restlessness in his eyes and urgency in his voice.

"I looked at the newspaper before," he said tensely. "According to the sky chart, the full moon will rise at five minutes before seven tonight. When that happens I'll suffer another one of my spells."

“I know,” Caroline said. “But that’s over five hours from now. We still have plenty of time.”

“No,” Talbot said. He began squeezing his hands together roughly. “We’ve got to do something now. What if your plan doesn’t work?”

“It will.”

“But what if it *doesn’t?”* he said. “What if your sedatives aren’t strong enough or what if you can’t administer them in time? Please, find something made of silver. A dagger or a walking stick—”

“Lawrence,” she said, “I hate to say this, but I’m starting to believe that you bring the change on yourself.”

“I’ve heard that before, Doctor,” he said. “The last time was in London, right before I ripped the throat from the psychiatrist who was saying it.”

“That doesn’t make it any less true.”

“At least put me in the cell,” he pleaded. “Whatever the cause, take that precaution.”

“We can’t put you behind prison bars without admitting your guilt,” Caroline said. “If we do that, then the state will take over your care. We’ll never be able to work on a cure.”

Talbot shook his head forlornly. “I don’t think I like this world of yours,” he said. “People have gotten smart without becoming very wise. Everything moves faster but nothing moves any more efficiently.”

Caroline didn’t disagree but she assured him again that there was still enough time to do what needed to be done. Talbot didn’t seem comforted, but he sat back and stopped arguing.

The truth was, Caroline felt awful. She’d been sitting here hoping that her own quiet confidence and this neutral environment, free of dark woods and gothic arches, might be mitigating factors. They hadn’t been. Until now, she had also been wondering if it wouldn’t be better for Talbot, better for all of them, if she let this play out. If they simply sat here and he didn’t transform, then there would be nothing to connect him with the killings. That would also give her a handle on how to cure him: through the mind. If Talbot did begin to change, then the troopers could always lock him up. Contrary to what he said, the jail seemed sturdy enough—at least as sturdy

as the brick wall in the castle. If he transformed, at least Caroline would have a good look at the nocturnal state of her patient.

Now, however, she wasn't so sure that to let it play out was a sensible course of action. Given Talbot's already agitated state—and it was still nearly four hours before moon-rise—she was beginning to think that whatever power was at work on him was far more powerful than a physical condition heightened and reinforced by suggestion. Sedation might be a better idea, and soon.

Caroline looked over at Willis. The trooper had left them alone since they'd arrived. During lunch hour he even brought back food for everyone —"State's treat," he said affably as he handed out hamburgers, fries, and cans of Fresca. Talbot didn't touch his meal.

At the moment, Willis was on the telephone with the fire chief, who was still at the Tombs. From what she was able to overhear, it sounded as though the fire was finally out and a team was getting ready to go in. Caroline was thinking of going over and asking him if they could move Talbot to the clinic. She could always make up something about a preexisting hypertensive state.

Talbot continued to knead his hands. At least several times a minute he looked up at the clock.

"Lawrence," she said, "I'm going to keep saying this until it sinks in. I want you to calm down. I *need* you to relax."

"Relax!" Talbot yelled. "How can I when in just a few hours the moon will rise and I'll kill again?"

Willis looked over. "Excuse me, Mr. Talbot?"

"It's nothing," Caroline said.

"It didn't sound like nothing," said Willis. "It sounded like your friend said he'll kill again."

"He did," she said. "We're arguing about fox hunting. He's for it, I'm against it. Seems they do a lot of that over on English estates."

Willis glanced over at Deputy Trooper Clyde, who was on the phone. It looked like Willis wanted to say something. Instead he glanced at his watch, pursed his lips, and returned to his paperwork.

Caroline exhaled softly. She didn't want to say anything that would upset Talbot further. Instead, she held his hand and rubbed his shoulder reassuringly and tried to put him at ease.

But when three o'clock arrived and Tom Stevenson hadn't, even Caroline became concerned. She said something to Willis, who put in a call to the courthouse. He was informed by the bailiff that the session was over and the lawyer would be leaving at any moment.

Talbot was not reassured. He rose and walked slowly around the office, running his fingers through his hair and looking up anxiously. Only now he wasn't looking at the clock. He was glancing at the high window, looking out at the sky. He was watching . . . and waiting.

TWELVE

By the middle of the afternoon, the fire at the Tombs was little more than patches of smoke clinging to blackened stones and charred timbers. Water that had been part of the Gulf of Mexico earlier in the day ran down the walls and sat in puddles on the tiles and hardwood floors. In one day, the rooms that had been so carefully and lovingly preserved by Joan Raymond suddenly looked their age.

While most of the exhausted fire fighters rested, three men donned self-contained breathing apparatuses, entered the castle, and began looking for the remains Trooper Willis had said would be there. A LifeSaver helicopter had been flown to LaMirada Hospital from Naples and was ready to evacuate any survivors. If the fire fighters found anyone alive they would be evacuated at once. If not, they would be left where they were until the police arrived.

To short, chunky rookie Emmett Vogan, who worked as a high school science teacher when he wasn't fighting fires, the interior of the castle looked like his uncle Cedric's barbecue pit after a pork roast. The stone walls were scorched different shades of gray, from pale to nearly charcoal. Drapery and rubber-backed rugs had been burned onto the walls and floor in a few areas and burned up everywhere else. Furniture had been reduced to stacks of charred sticks—just like the dry twigs Vogan's dad used to move the coals in the pit with and then drop in. There was a thin tester of smoke overhead in the foyer. Except for that, the twilight coming through the shattered windows was clear and crisp. If he didn't hear only his own breathing, Vogan knew—absolutely *knew*—that the silence of the gutted castle would be absolute.

Along with veteran William Harrigan, the high school phys. ed. teacher, Vogan drew basement duty. That was where Trooper Willis had told Fire Chief Jerry Frank that the bodies of Henry Pratt and William Porterhouse were supposed to be, along with someone or some*thing* else that they were supposed to watch out for. Willis hadn't been very specific about that, which meant he didn't know himself. He'd said to be careful, though, which Vogan always was after a blaze.

Vogan and the lanky Harrigan found the basement easily enough. Before going in, they used a laser-based audioscope to measure movement in the walls and ceiling. After determining that there were no vibrations that would indicate serious structural instability, the men checked their oxygen tanks, put in their rubber mouthpieces, and unrolled an aluminum ladder Vogan carried. Then they climbed down to the dock, which was littered with shattered pieces of staircase and a fireplace poker. Spotter Perry Ivins stood by the opening with a battery-powered spotlight and a field radio. He watched carefully, ready to summon help if needed.

The wood was slippery and each man moved slowly, following the beam of the powerful hand lamp he carried. Almost at once they saw the rotating door, half-open, with two bodies lying inside.

"Hoo-boy," Harrigan said after removing his mouthpiece. "We've got some nasty ones here."

Vogan looked away while Harrigan checked to make sure—as if there were any doubt—that the people inside were dead.

"Goners?" asked Ivins.

"Totally. Two of them, just like the trooper said, deader'n Lewis and Clark. And it wasn't the fire that killed them. These guys look like they were killed with a weed whacker."

Listening to the conversation, Vogan had to suck hard on the mouthpiece to keep from vomiting. Unlike Harrigan, who had a macho streak the size of the Tower of London, Vogan had joined the department because he wanted to hang out with adults now and then instead of with kids, and maybe put a little excitement in his life. Tagging and bagging the dead had seemed like a remote possibility.

In an effort not to have to look, but without appearing to do so, Vogan walked wide around the two dead men. He turned his lantern deeper into the chamber. And jumped.

"Holy Mother of God!" he cried after spitting out his mouthpiece. "Bill —*Bill!"*

"Christ!" Harrigan yelled, "would you turn down the volume? I'm in the same goddamn room!"

"I'm sorry!" Vogan said. "But there's another body here."

"It must be the Frankenstein dude," Harrigan said.

"This is no 'dude,' " Vogan said. "This is a freakin' giant!"

Harrigan turned his light ahead. The two beams crossed the body of a giant. Sections of the big man's black jacket had been burned away, revealing patches of charred, pastel-green flesh. There were also raw, blackened scars on the back of its neck, and only knotty patches of black hair grew on its squarish head. The scalp itself was gray-green and tightly wrinkled where it hadn't been burned.

Harrigan whistled. "Man, he couldn't have been much of a looker even before he was burned. And the size of him! He's got to be, what—almost eight feet tall."

"If he's alive," Ivins called from above, "see if he's a free agent."

"Ivins, the only place this guy's playing is on Team Hell," Harrigan said. "Vog, check to see if he's alive."

Vogan breathed deeply. "He sure doesn't look it," he said. He wished he were breathing bottled air instead of the stuff in the basement. Just inhaling the same oxygen this body was in made his mouth taste foul. Kneeling beside the enormous form, Vogan put down his lamp and removed his yellow glove. He stretched out his hand and rubbed the bare flesh of the giant's left arm. It was rough, like shark skin. He held two fingers under the figure's nose. Even the size of the nostrils was huge.

"Well?" Harrigan asked.

"He's got third-degree burns on his back and there's no air coming from his lungs," Vogan said.

Harrigan came over. “Let’s turn him over and check for a heartbeat. I don’t want to get legal papers from the Frankenstein family saying we didn’t do everything we could to help the patient.”

“Patient,” Vogan said. “I wonder whose patient he was before *we* found him. He’s got bolts in his neck, for Chris-sakes. What the hell’s *that* about?”

“I don’t know,” said Harrigan. “You’re the science teacher.”

“Yeah, but this is science fiction, Bill. I mean, look at that.” He turned his lantern on the neck. “There are signs of healing around those bolts. They aren’t puttied on. They’re actually *piercing* the neck.”

“Lucky for us it’s not our job to worry about it,” Harrigan said. “Let’s just get the guy onto his back.”

“Yeah, sure,” Vogan said. He stepped over the body. “You take this shoulder and yank it toward you. I’ll push. On three.”

“Okay,” Harrigan said. “One . . . two . . . *three.”*

Both men grunted as they pulled. The monstrous body felt incredibly solid as it turned over. It landed on its back with a heavy thud.

Vogan recoiled as he looked at its face. Even Harrigan backed away.

“Whew!” said Harrigan. “That is *nasty!”*

Vogan’s lantern was shining right on the giant’s face. The thin, green-gray tissue was partly burned away, exposing the front and sides of the zygomatic bone from just under the eyes to both cheeks. The eyelids themselves had been burned black, and the thick brow of the wide, tall forehead was badly charred. The nose was intact but the mouth was badly damaged: the upper lip had been singed off, revealing blackened gum, and the lower lip was scorched. A long scar under the left side of the jaw was intact, as were a pair of silver neck-bolts. The hands were gravely burned, with muscle and bone exposed on the backs. Their condition suggested to Vogan that the giant had held them in front of his face in an effort to protect his eyes.

There was very little blood. The man looked like he could have been dead for years. And yet—

Vogan made a face as he slipped his hand on the tattered lapel of the giant’s jacket. He put his hand on the bare, wrinkled chest. It was like touching papier-mâchê instead of flesh.

“So?” Harrigan said. “How is he?”

Vogan sat back on his heels. “Expired. As previously announced.”

Harrigan nodded. “Hey, Ivins?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell the chief we’ve got three—”

“Oh, shit.” Vogan tugged on Harrigan’s sleeve. “Bill, he just moved.”

“Horse apples. It was just a shadow from the hand lantern.”

Vogan shook his head vigorously. “I’m telling you, William, Junior just tried to make a fist.”

“Rigor mortis,” Harrigan said. “The guy is zero-point-zero on the Olympic life chart.”

“No!” Vogan replied confidently. “That wasn’t a muscular stiffening. That was *movement!”*

“Right,” said Harrigan. “You been sucking on the nitrous oxide tank by mistake?”

“Goddammit, I saw what I saw! His hand twitched and it wasn’t the—”

Vogan’s mouth clapped shut as the giant’s right arm rose slowly. The wrist was bent, the fingers hanging down and wriggling slowly.

Harrigan fell back. “Oh . . . my . . . God,” he said. “Vog, I’m sorry! *Ivins!”*

“What?”

“Junior here is alive,” he said. “It’s *alive!”*

“Gotcha!” the spotter said. “I’m calling in the chopper crew.”

“Send the other guys too,” Harrigan said. “This fellah’s made of concrete. We’ll need help getting him out.” He shook his head. “But Jesus, I could have sworn he was dead. We both thought it.”

Vogan and Harrigan continued to watch as the arm stopped perpendicular to the floor. The hand reached up and the fingers straightened.

“I don’t believe it,” Harrigan said. “He’s been burned and asphyxiated. How can he be *alive?”*

“Maybe he isn’t human,” Vogan said. “You know all the strange things that happened here over the years? Maybe he’s a space alien and this is

some kind of hidden laboratory. Like a Roswell East."

"You've been renting too many ninety-nine-cent videocassettes," Harrigan said. "More likely Junior's been kept down here for years. That's why he's so pale and wrinkled."

Less than five minutes after that, under two hand lamps and a high-intensity spotlight, an emergency medical team of two men and one woman was using a catheter to deliver a defibrillation shock of ten amps to the bottom of the heart. The attending paramedics were stunned by the condition of the victim's torso. It wasn't so much the present wounds that alarmed them as it was the older ones. They'd been stitched in an archaic manner with thin hemp sutures. The medical team couldn't imagine where on earth he'd received treatment like that.

"Junior," as the victim had been nicknamed, seemed to respond to the electric jolt. His eyes fluttered open, his lips moved, and he took a breath. A heartbeat was weak but present.

A half hour later, after a great deal of grunting and struggling, the giant had been removed from the basement. Ten minutes later, under a nearly black sky, Junior was being loaded into the LifeSaver helicopter for the short trip to the mainland.

He was not the only longtime La Viudan onboard.

THIRTEEN

At three-forty, Trooper Willis received another call from the fire chief. This one was shorter than the last and Willis seemed a little agitated after he received it. Leaving his cubicle, Willis told Deputy Trooper Clyde that he was going to meet the LifeSaver at the hospital. He did not say anything about what the fire fighters had found. The bodies of Pratt and Porterhouse, Caroline suspected. She wondered if they'd also found the Monster as well.

Stevenson had not yet arrived, but Willis's departure changed things. Caroline felt that it would be much less difficult to persuade the easygoing deputy trooper to let Talbot sit in the cell. If Stevenson didn't show up by five o'clock, she would ask. That would still give them a comfortable cushion before Talbot's transformation—assuming he did transform.

Though Talbot did not speak since their last exchange, he was clearly growing very impatient. His pacing was brisk and his looks were now toward the front door. If it got too late and he wasn't behind bars, Caroline assumed that Talbot would try to get away.

Tom Stevenson arrived nearly an hour after Willis left. He stood six-foot-two with long brown hair pulled into a ponytail. He had a straight nose, a strong jaw, and thin lips. His penetrating brown eyes were intense but tired. He was lean and wore a backpack as well as an earth-brown blazer, old jeans, a forest-green shirt with no tie, and black hiking shoes. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, despite the fact that he was over five hours late. To the contrary. He moved slowly as he entered the door to their left. He was speaking to his secretary, Doris, on his cellular phone, trying to catch up on office matters he'd ignored during the day.

Talbot walked toward him as he entered. Caroline went with him, hooking her arm in his. Talbot seemed oblivious to it.

“Are you Mr. Stevenson?” Talbot asked.

Stevenson nodded, then held up a finger as he finished his call. He gave quick, concise instructions to his secretary. When he was through, he put his cellular phone in his jacket pocket and looked at Talbot and Caroline.

“Yes, I’m Tom Stevenson,” he said. “If you’ll have a seat I’ll be with you in just a minute.”

“But we’ve been sitting all day,” Talbot said.

“And I’ve been standing all day,” Stevenson replied. “If you’ll just sit down and let me get my bearings I’ll be right with you.”

Caroline gave Talbot’s arm a little tug. “Come on, Lawrence,” she said. “Mr. Stevenson needs to become bearable.”

Stevenson made a face. “That was cute. Look, I’m sorry things’ve worked out this way. It’s been a long and frustrating day—”

“For all of us,” Caroline pointed out.

“I know and I’m sorry. Let me have a word with Deputy Clyde and I’ll be right over—I promise.”

Caroline and Talbot walked back to the bench and sat while Deputy Clyde brought Stevenson up-to-date on the day’s activities. Stevenson listened very attentively and then took a moment to read Trooper Willis’s report. When he was finished, he walked over to Talbot and Caroline with long-legged strides. His expression was more relaxed now.

“Well, it sounds like it’s been a helluva day for you both,” he said. “Why don’t we try and start this part of it over again. I’m Tom Stevenson.”

Talbot stood and offered his hand. “Lawrence Talbot,” he said.

The men shook hands and then Stevenson turned to Caroline. She stood and extended her hand.

“Caroline Cooke,” she said.

“Dr. Cooke,” Stevenson said, “my condolences on your loss.”

“Thanks,” she replied.

“And again, I’m sorry about the wait,” Stevenson said. “This was a bench trial that should have been over before lunch. But there was the fire and then the plantiffs wanted to get all kinds of facts and figures on the record in case there are future hearings. That’s why it took so long.”

“Mr. Stevenson,” Talbot said anxiously, “the two of you can chat later. Right now it’s terribly important that you lock me up.”

The lawyer’s brown eyes darkened. “What?”

“I want to be locked in the cell or at the clinic,” Talbot said. “Someplace that’s very secure.”

Stevenson looked at Caroline. “Is something wrong here? Have you been mistreated during your stay here?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Caroline said.

“Then what is it?”

“Mr. Stevenson,” Talbot said, “in just a few hours the moon will be full and I’ll experience another of my horrible—”

“Seizures,” Caroline interrupted. “Mr. Stevenson, I’m a medical doctor. Mr. Talbot suffers a physiological condition that appears to be aggravated by the full moon.”

“Not *appears* to be,” Talbot said. “It is.”

“What kind of condition?” Stevenson asked.

Caroline answered before Talbot could say anything else. “To put it simply, Mr. Stevenson, Lawrence is an auto-hypnose. Sometimes his spells can become rather violent. We can discuss the specifics of his malady in private. Right now, proper treatment cannot be administered because we lost his medication in the fire. So I suggest that we bring Mr. Talbot to the LaMirada Clinic for the time being, to keep him from harming himself or anyone else.”

Stevenson looked from Caroline to Talbot. “You’re talking about the psychiatric ward?” Stevenson asked.

“Yes,” Talbot replied.

“You understand,” said Stevenson, “that your expressed need for incarceration will have to be divulged to and logged by Deputy Trooper Clyde. If, Mr. Talbot, you are in any way implicated in the activities the state will claim were committed at the Tombs—”

“The murders *were* committed,” Talbot cried. “Damn it all, don’t you see? I committed them both!”

Deputy Trooper Clyde froze behind his desk. Stevenson stared dumbfounded. Caroline's shoulders sank along with her spirits.

"Mr. Talbot," Stevenson said, "please say nothing else at the present time. Do you understand? Mr. Clyde is obliged to report everything he hears."

"We understand," Caroline said disgustedly. "Maybe *you* should have thought of that when you got here."

Stevenson rattled Willis's report. "Excuse me," he said irritably, "but this report doesn't say anything about a murder charge against Mr. Talbot or anyone else! Only two missing persons and some unknown attacker you described to Trooper Willis."

Deputy Clyde rose behind the desk. "Tom, I think you and I better have a little chat—"

"Can't that wait?" Caroline asked. "It's imperative that we get Mr. Talbot to the clinic."

Clyde shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't let you go now."

"Why?"

"Because of what Mr. Talbot just said. I'm going to have to take a statement."

Caroline turned to Stevenson. "Do something. Lawrence is distraught. He doesn't know what he's saying. That's part of autohypnotic mania."

"I see," Stevenson said.

Clyde came around the desk. He walked toward them. "Is there some way you can get Mr. Talbot's records faxed over?" Stevenson asked.

"His records," Caroline said.

"Yes," Stevenson said. "His medical history. So we can show that Mr. Talbot's been under your care for his condition. That he's not himself because he hasn't had access to his medication. When we do that we can postpone any further action until he's been treated."

"His records are not accessible," Caroline said hopelessly.

"What do you mean?" Stevenson asked.

"I mean they're—" she started, then stopped. What was she going to tell him? That they were in London and that the last entry was fifty years ago?

“They’re in transit,” she said. “En route from my office to here.”

Deputy Clyde arrived a moment later. “Attorney,” he said, “are you going to let me talk to your client?”

Stevenson regarded Caroline. “Doctor, unless you give me something concrete, I can’t stop Deputy Clyde from taking a statement.”

“You want a statement?” Talbot said angrily. “Here it is. Last night I killed two men at the castle. Now I want to be locked up so I don’t kill anyone else. Are you going to do it or not?”

“You’ll sign a document to that effect?” Clyde asked.

“No, he won’t,” Stevenson said. “But if he’ll feel better being in the cell, I have no objection to you putting him there—for now. Let me talk to Dr. Cooke and then you and I will have a chat.”

“Fair enough.” Clyde looked at Talbot. “You coming?”

Talbot nodded forlornly and Clyde led him away.

The holding cell was tucked in a corner of the station house, near the lavatory and the water cooler. The cell was three yards deep and four yards across. There were brick walls on two sides and steel bars on the other two. Inside was a cot and a porcelain sink. Clyde opened the double lock, placed Talbot inside, then shut and locked the door. Talbot went to the far side of the cell. His back to the others, he wrapped his fingers around the bars and stared out the high window at the deepening blue of the sky.

Caroline felt sick seeing him in there. She looked away from the cell. Talbot seemed to have the weight of the world on his broad shoulders.

“Dr. Cooke,” Stevenson said, “I want to help him. I want to help you both. But there’s something you’re not telling me. What is it?”

“To tell you the truth,” Caroline said, “I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure what to tell you about any of this,” she said.

“I’m confused,” Stevenson said.

“Me too,” she said. She was tired, her mind was tired. It was all too much to process. “The truth, Mr. Stevenson, is that I haven’t been treating Mr. Talbot for anything. Before last night I didn’t even know he existed.”

Stevenson glanced at Clyde. The deputy had returned to his desk to log the time and nature of the incarceration. He didn't seem to have heard. The attorney took Caroline by the arm and led her toward the back of the station house. Caroline sat down on the old iron radiator, her arms folded across her chest.

"Maybe you'd better start from the beginning," Stevenson said softly. "Tell me everything."

Caroline did. As she spoke, she found herself doubting what she'd seen, what she remembered. There had to be another explanation for all of it. To his credit, Stevenson listened as though she was describing nothing more unusual than a mugging or a car accident. While they spoke, Talbot didn't say anything. He didn't even move. He simply stood in the cell, holding the bars and looking out the window.

When Caroline had finished telling Stevenson everything that had happened, he stood for a long time just staring at her.

"And you believe all of this is real," he said at last.

"I didn't hallucinate any of it, if that's what you mean. Ask Stephen Banning, if you can find him. He saw the Frankenstein Monster."

"Unfortunately, Stephen's not the most reliable witness in the world," Stevenson said. "He's got a history of seeing monsters. Mummies when he's sober, pink elephants when he isn't."

"That doesn't change the fact that he saw the Frankenstein Monster," Caroline admitted. "Jesus, listen to me. *Monsters.* I can't rule out the possibility that this whole thing is a sick joke. That someone's trying to scare me away."

"I wouldn't put it past a few of the townspeople to do that," Stevenson said. "Some of them can be pretty territorial, especially the old-timers. The thing is, creating a scam like you described would require a lot of people to pitch in. Getting inside the castle, sealing someone in the basement, rigging a guy in a monster mask to float to the surface—and then there's Talbot." The attorney looked over at the cell. "What would he say if I talked to him?"

"Oh, he believes," Caroline said. "And—there's something about him. Something very sincere, something that's not of this time. He's the main

reason I can't simply dismiss this whole thing as a fake."

"What do you think is going to happen when the moon rises?"

"I honestly don't know," Caroline said. She looked out at the darkening sky. She didn't want to believe it was going to happen, that Talbot was going to transform. It wasn't that she was afraid of facing something new. Whatever happened to him, there had to be a medical explanation for it. A *scientific* explanation. She simply didn't want the man to have to go through the hell he had described to her.

Suddenly, Talbot turned toward Caroline and called her name. She excused herself and walked toward the cell.

"What is it, Lawrence?" she asked.

"Caroline, I've been watching the sky. There isn't much time. Do you remember what we were talking about earlier? About the silver?"

She nodded.

"I want you to find something. Now."

"Lawrence—"

"Hear me out," Talbot said. He ran his hands over the bars. "This cell may not be strong enough to hold me. If I get out, a silver knife or bookend, anything, may save your life."

"Lawrence, I've said this before and I'll keep saying it. You need to calm down."

"I am calm," Talbot replied. He looked toward the window. "But soon it will be out of my control."

"Lawrence, you can't think that way," Caroline said. "One of the first things any doctor learns is that a patient's positive outlook is the best medicine there is."

"That may be true for patients who are sick," Talbot replied. "I'm not. I'm cursed. And tonight you'll see. Tonight you'll learn the difference between them. Now please, do as I ask."

Caroline saw the earnestness in his eyes, heard it in his voice. She turned from the cage and walked slowly toward Deputy Clyde. Stevenson ran after her.

"What is it?" the attorney asked.

“He’s worried about my safety,” Caroline said. “He’s afraid the cell may not hold him.”

“Jesus,” the attorney said.

“He wants me to arm myself with something made of silver,” Caroline said, “and I think I’d better do it to put his mind at—”

Caroline stopped as she felt something: a change in the room.

“Dr. Cooke, what’s wrong?” Stevenson asked.

She looked back at the cell just as the first hint of moon-glow spread up over the dirty window. Her eyes shifted to Talbot. He was still standing with his back to them.

“Lawrence,” Caroline said quietly. “Are you all right?”

He didn’t answer.

“Lawrence?”

Just then he gurgled, dropped to a knee, and screamed.

Only it was not a human scream.

FOURTEEN

The LifeSaver helicopter knifed through the dark skies. Onboard were three people who had devoted their lives to saving the sick and the injured: not one of them had ever seen anyone like the patient they were carrying. He was extraordinary not just in terms of his size and weight but also his wounds. Many of the burns and cuts were new, but many of them were extremely old and very poorly healed. The medics couldn't begin to imagine how he'd acquired them—or how he'd survived.

On the flight deck, sitting beside pilot Lew Kelly, copilot and emergency medical technician Mary Stewart had radioed ahead to LaMirada Memorial Hospital to inform the emergency room staff of their ETA. The medic also told them they'd need a bed with an extension for the nearly eight-foot-tall victim, one who was suffering from extensive third-degree burns, virtually nonexistent vital signs, and the most extreme hypothermia she'd ever seen in a living human.

"I really don't know how the big guy's still alive," the blond-haired Mary added, "but he is. At least, Junior moves a hand now and then. Right, Emma?"

"He surely does," elderly paramedic Emma Dunn replied into the mouthpiece of her headset. The white-haired woman was sitting on a fold-down seat in the closed-off medical bay behind the flight deck. She looked down at the patient. He was too big for either of the cots and was lying on green blankets that had been spread on the floor between them. "His eyes flutter open a little now and then too," Emma said. "LaMirada, I've got to tell you—this man defies every scrap of medical science I was ever taught. His chest expansion is virtually nil, diastolic and systolic pressure aren't registering at all, and if he's got any veins in his big body for an IV, I

couldn't find them. He's also got flesh as tough as elephant hide. The patient's temperature is eighty-eight point three. By all rights he should be a corpse. But like Mary says, he surely—wait." The paramedic leaned close to the body. "Hold on, LaMirada. It looks like he may be trying to speak."

"Put your mouthpiece near his mouth," Stewart said. She reached for a button on the control panel. "I'll record it. The fire chief might want it."

"I can't tell if he's trying to say something or if he's trembling," Emma said. She watched intently for a few seconds more. Then the lips stopped moving. The giant body was still again.

Emma put her fingers to his wrist for a moment, then sat back. She shook her head. "I just don't get it at *all.* It's like that Edgar Allan Poe story 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.' A man's body was dead but his soul was trapped in limbo, keeping the body alive. Rotting, but alive."

"I think I'll stick to Tom Clancy," Lew Kelly said.

"Are you sure what you just saw wasn't a death rattle?" Mary asked. "Muscles can tense in pretty misleading ways when people die."

"I'm sure," Emma said. "If this man's dead then so am I. His chest is still moving and I still get a pulse. It's very, very faint but it's there."

Emma started as something moved by the giant's feet. She looked over.

A woman was standing there, staring down at her. She was a ghostly figure wearing a tattered white crinoline gown, a head of filthy black hair, and a depraved expression on her ashen face.

"How did you get in here?" Emma demanded. "Who are you?"

The wraithlike figure did not reply. She extended her arms and moved her bony fingers slowly as though beckoning the medic.

"I asked you a question!" Emma yelled. "Did you come through the storage compartment?"

"Emma, how did who get in here?" Mary asked.

Before Emma could answer, a strong, grayish-white hand rose slowly behind her. After the Monster's powerful hand grabbed her neck and squeezed tightly, she was unable to say anything. His thick fingertips met on the other side of her throat; her larynx and pharynx were immediately pulped beneath his grip, and her internal and external jugular veins both

burst. Her head sat on top of his fist like a plucked flower. Blood spilled from both sides of her silent mouth.

Sandra Mornay's eyes widened at the sight of the blood. Hissing delightedly, she moved toward the dying woman. The Monster continued to hold the paramedic while the vampire knelt in front of her. A wicked smile on her pale mouth, Sandra parted her lips and placed them over the medic's bloody chin. Her tongue scooped away the blood, then moved down Emma's wrinkled neck.

When the vampire was finished, the Monster lowered his arm. He released the dead woman and his eyes opened slightly. They were dark slits against his pasty face.

"Emma!" Mary said. "Come in!"

Sandra rose contentedly. Twin streams of blood leaked from the sides of her mouth as she gazed at the Monster.

"Rise," she commanded.

"Yes . . . Master," the Monster said in a gravelly voice. He spread his fingers and placed his open hands on the floor. He sat up, his arms extended in front of him. Then he stretched his right arm to the side and leaned against the wall. He rose awkwardly.

Sandra raised a slender arm. She pointed to the front of the helicopter. "Kill them," she whispered. "Kill them all."

"Yes . . . Master."

On the flight deck, the pilot and copilot continued to listen.

"Emma?" Mary said. "Emma?"

"It sounds like her radio's gone dead," the pilot said. "I can't even hear her breathing."

"I'm going back," Mary said. She hurriedly unbuckled her seat belt and slid from the seat. "Emma was talking to somebody and it couldn't have been Junior. Somebody must've hidden in the storage compartment."

"You want my blackjack?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'll be okay."

The pilot nodded as the copilot went to the door a few feet behind them. She opened it and stopped cold.

The entrance was filled with the giant. She could only see to the top of his massive chest. The rest of him was hidden by the top of the doorway. As she stood there, his arms rose from his sides. He grabbed her throat tightly and lifted her up by the head. Her feet kicked until three of her seven cervical vertebrae snapped, severing the spinal cord. The copilot went limp and the Monster dropped her corpse. Then the giant raised his arms and pushed against the top of the doorway.

Pilot Kelly hadn't heard anything but the loud beating of the main rotor. When he finally turned, he saw Mary lying on the floor. He also saw the giant pushing against the wall above the doorway. A moment later the powerful arms pushed through and the lightweight materials crumbled like cake. The creature stalked onto the flight deck.

"Mayday!" Kelly shouted into the radio as he threw the chopper into a rapid descent. The Monster fell forward, against the copilot's seat.

"LifeSaver One," said the dispatcher, "what is your problem?"

"LaMirada! He isn't human!"

"Say again?" said the dispatcher.

"I said he's not human! Mary is lying on the floor—I can't see Emma. I'm going to try and land somewhere!"

The blue nose of the chopper was pointing down at nearly a forty-five-degree angle, the landing lights flashing against the dark sky. The Monster pushed against the back of the chair. It bent across the base and smashed into the systems display. Growling, the Monster leaned on the wreckage and stood unsteadily. In rage, he put his fist through the side door. Wind poured through the opening and whipped the ragged tails of the giant's coat.

Battered by the wind, the pilot leaned hard on the control stick and banked to the east. The sudden, arcing turn spilled the giant against the door. It also swung the helicopter toward a cove just south of the marina. He saw a small patch of beach where he could set the chopper down.

"Come on!" he said through his teeth as he pushed the chopper ahead. "You're going to make it. You're going to—"

With an enraged cry, the giant pushed himself off the door. Tromping over the wrecked copilot's seat, he stopped in the center of the flight deck, bent his upper back against the ceiling, and pushed.

“Don’t!” Kelly screamed as the giant pressed upward. “Christ almighty, *don’t!”*

The Monster snarled and continued to raise his massive shoulders. The plastic and aluminum of the ceiling structure cracked, buckled, and filled the cabin with sickening groans. Above, the main rotor drive shaft whined as its bolts strained against their base.

“Stop it!” Kelly cried. “Don’t you understand? You’ll *kill* us!”

Frantically, Kelly flipped on the automatic pilot, released his harness, and ran at the Monster. He was too late. As he reached for the giant’s head, the top of the chopper popped open. The helicopter shuddered as the rotor hub came free on the port side. The rotor head continued to spin as it twisted to the starboard side of the craft. With a deafening crash, the blades slashed into the air inlet above the cabin. They sliced through the wall and turned the helicopter on its side.

“God—!” Kelly screamed, an instant before he fell against the port wall and was knocked unconscious.

He was unaware of the chopper dropping, like a dart, the remaining two hundred and twenty feet to the cove.

He was unaware of the awful crash, which crushed the flight deck into the tail boom and send the rotor head pin-wheeling off.

He was unaware of the fuel tank exploding, of the wreckage being consumed in a black and red fireball.

He was dead as two figures emerged from the flaming holocaust. The one who came first was wailing and waving his arms violently, the sleeves of his coat ablaze. He lurched across the narrow sandbar and waded into the sea to put the fire out. The other walked more slowly, the crinoline of her dress in flames. She drifted into the surf, steam rising around her with every measured step. Stopping when the waters were hip-high, she raised her arms to the moon. Ash swirled on the waters and rode the air around her as she celebrated the murderous flames and the blood on her tongue and the eons of death from which these great waters smelled. It was glorious to feel, to walk the earth again.

Then she heard the voice inside her head. Lowering her arms, she came to attention. The voice commanded her to take the Monster to a safe place.

It ordered her to walk in the water, away from the wreckage, so that their footsteps could not be traced. It told her to wait until he came to collect them.

"Yes, Master," Sandra Mornay replied.

She looked at the Monster, who was standing immobile several paces ahead of her. His back was wet and glowing red from the fire of the burning helicopter. His arms were hanging straight down and dripping salt water.

"Come," she said to him. "We must do the Master's bidding."

The Monster raised his arms in front of him until they were nearly parallel to the sea. He turned slowly, his head tilted slightly back, his hooded eyes nearly shut.

"Yes," he said from deep in his throat. "I . . . come."

As sirens sounded in the distance, the undead woman and her living dead companion waded toward the north, toward darkness.

FIFTEEN

After the coming of darkness, the motor yacht slipped quietly from its permanent berth. The sleek, modern, forty-nine-foot vessel slashed purposefully through the calm waters off the coast of Marya Island. It moved with almost supernatural ease, barely stirring the waters as it glided swiftly out to sea. There were no lights onboard and no one moved on deck until the ship reached nearly the halfway point between the Morgan Islands and the western coast of Florida. Then, a shadow seemed to pass from the cabin to the foredeck of the yacht. It stopped near the pointed bow.

Wrapped tightly in his long black cloak, Count Dracula was unaffected by the motion of the ship. The gusting sea breeze stirred neither the vampire nor his cloak. As the streamlined vessel sped through the dark waters, Dracula was only aware of what had drawn him from the cabin: an ominous change in the ambience of the night. It was subtle at first, a sense that there was something powerful lurking beyond the horizon. The feeling grew stronger and more focused as the ship continued toward the shore. It wasn't a storm, the coming of which Dracula occasionaly felt. It wasn't war and bloodshed, which the vampire could also sense. What was out there was fury, bundled tightly and ready to erupt. But it wasn't human rage. It was much too powerful and vivid.

There was no outward sign of Count Dracula's sense of dread. His dark eyes remained fixed, his strong nose aloof, his full lips pressed together. Inside, however, the Lord of the Vampires was no longer at peace.

His body had reacted quickly to the manifestation. All of his defenses came alive. It began with a tingling in the base of his skull. The nerves there wriggled like maggots moving through his face and throat and brain. They heightened the vampire's predatory senses and made him salivate, which he

rarely did after feeding. As Dracula tasted the blood-tinged saliva, his eyes narrowed and his lips parted slightly. His two small fangs glistened rose-red in the moonlight.

Something new is out there, he told himself. Something baleful and pernicious. Something out of his control.

The maggots spread through his neck and shoulders, all the muscles of which came alive. He closed his eyes and allowed his spirit to join with the vermin of the shore—the bats and rodents, the hornets and lice, the frogs and snakes. The collective search was neither long nor difficult. The creatures of blight and darkness felt what he did: an animal hunger that was kin to his, yet more feral. They sensed a roiling demon-center that drove an uncontrollable need for blood.

Dracula knew to whom the animal fury belonged.

It was Talbot . . . the Wolf Man.

Count Dracula opened his eyes. To his unnatural eyes the stars were bright smears churning in the turbulent atmosphere, the moon a beacon blinding to look at. He stared across the sea, which was white with flame reflected from above. This matter could not be dealt with by his éminence grise on shore. Sandra Mornay would be no match for Talbot. Dracula must confront his old nemesis himself.

The vampire swept downstairs, to the main cabin. He collected something from Andre and then he returned to the deck. Unfurling his cloak, the vampire spread his arms full. The cape filled with wind and it shrank as he did. Within moments, the powerful, gray bat was flying through the night, following a beacon more powerful than any known to mortal predator.

SIXTEEN

Talbot's scream echoed for a moment and then died. Somehow, the room seemed even quieter than before.

Caroline walked toward Talbot slowly, hesitantly, as though she were approaching a wounded animal. She didn't know what to expect. She hadn't seen him transform at the castle and she didn't know if he was transforming or whether he was fighting it. He was still on one knee, his hands gripping the bars, his forehead pressed between them. When she reached the cell she crouched and faced him. The window was at her back, the edge of the moon peeking over the sill. Talbot was facing down, his forehead creased, his hair spilling over it. She put her left hand between the bars and touched his shoulder. He didn't seem to feel it.

"Lawrence?" she said quietly.

Caroline could hear him breathing, each breath shallow and labored. As she watched, perspiration collected on his brow and the creases deepened, as if he were in pain. And then he looked up, a strange darkness coming over his face. Greasy shadows appeared on his full cheeks, along his forehead, and under his eyes.

Caroline put her other hand into the cell and held his cheeks between her hands. "Lawrence, stay with me. Don't let this happen."

He swallowed another scream and tried to turn away, but Caroline held his face tightly. Suddenly, her fingertips tickled strangely and she withdrew them. The young woman watched as bristly hair grew along the side of his face and across his hairline. It sprouted so quickly and so fully that it just seemed to *appear.* She wanted to touch it, to assure herself that it was real, though she knew it was. As new wedges grew behind his cheekbones and

up his neck, she also knew that it wasn't hair. It was fur. Thick, tawny wolf-fur.

Talbot's lips and nose darkened. His eyes narrowed as more fur grew. It seemed to be closing in on his face—down his forehead, inward along his cheeks, up his chin toward the mouth. As it did, the fur thickened and grew longer.

After a moment Talbot no longer stared straight ahead. His gaze snapped from side to side. At the same time Talbot's bottom jaw extended slightly and rode up over his top lip. His nose grew wider. The wrinkles deepened along the bridge of his nose and down the sides. Caroline forced her eyes from his face and looked down. The backs of Talbot's hands were covered with thick, curly fur. His fingers seemed fatter, the skin more wrinkled. His nails had grown long and sharp. She looked up again. Now his face, head, and neck were completely covered with fur. She heard a pop and looked down. His boots had burst and he was perched on his toes, his insteps off the ground. His four-toed feet were covered with fur. Like his fingernails, his toenails had become claws.

"My God!" said Stevenson, who had followed her over.

The werewolf growled and thrust his arm through the bars, trying to get at the attorney. Caroline screamed and fell back on the floor. Stevenson also cried out and stumbled against the water cooler in an effort to get away. The cooler wobbled; the jug fell and exploded, startling the Wolf Man. Enraged, snarling and snapping, the Wolf Man twisted so that his arm stretched farther between the bars. The other hand gripped the bars, rattling them. Caroline looked up as dust sprinkled down from the ceiling.

"Deputy!" she cried. "Is that going to hold?"

Clyde had run over, his nightstick in his hand.

"It should," he said. "The cell's a solid piece. Even if it came free of the building, he'd still be locked inside."

"Unless he managed to bend the bars," she said.

"Yeah," Clyde agreed. "In that case, we'd have a big problem."

Caroline was still on the ground. Clyde helped her to her feet.

"God almighty," the deputy said and made the sign of the cross on his chest. "Jesus God, what is he?"

“A lycanthrope,” Caroline said. “A werewolf.”

“Just like your aunt wrote about,” Stevenson said. “Everything you told me, everything that happened on La Viuda—it’s true.”

Caroline stood away from the cell—or was it a cage now? She watched as the Wolf Man stepped back from the bars. His body remained crouched and alert as his eyes shifted from one to the other of them.

“He tried to warn us,” she said. “Forgive me, Lawrence. Forgive me thinking I was a lot smarter than I am.”

The werewolf howled, his cry echoing through the darkening room.

“What do we do now?” Clyde asked.

Caroline watched as the werewolf paced the cage for a moment. Then, suddenly, he lunged at them again, rattling the bars furiously, pulling and pushing on them, even attempting to squeeze through them. Just like in the castle, there was no ingenuity in his attack against his cage. Unable to make any headway, he turned to the bricks along the back wall of the cell. He raked them with his claws, pounded them with his palms, and hit them with his shoulders. Then, his anger increasing, he turned on the cot. He ripped it from its legs, which were bolted to the floor, and threw it at the bars. Then he attacked the mattress, shredding it and tossing the springs aside.

Throughout the assault the werewolf howled. Fiercely, loudly, and bitterly. The only times he stopped his attack were when Caroline walked nearer. He would pause and wrap his large hands around the bars. Then he’d move his face between them, cock his head slightly to one side, and growl softly. Caroline didn’t know whether it was because he recognized her or because she was the only woman in the group. Whatever the reason, the peaceful interludes were brief. After a few seconds the werewolf would begin to shake the bars lightly, then roughly. Then he would be tearing at them again with all of his strength and Caroline would leave in despair. She didn’t like to think of poor Talbot trapped inside that monstrous form. She was also frustrated because she couldn’t think of any way to help him. There was no way to get a sedative to him in this condition.

There was also no way she could attribute this to a disturbed state of mind. As far as she was aware, no one in recorded medical history had ever undergone a psychosomatic change like this. This was a physical malady. It

didn't shake her faith in medical science, though it did force her to acknowledge that the textbooks weren't as complete as they thought they were. At least, not any textbooks she'd ever read.

After a few minutes of watching Talbot's savage struggles—and ascertaining that the cell bars would hold—Deputy Trooper Clyde returned to his desk to phone Trooper Willis. As he sat down, the scanner picked up a call for the volunteer fire department to report to the fire station.

"Man, there are going to be some very tired fire fighters by the end of this day," Clyde said. "That's how it is with this town. Disaster always strikes in bunches." Clyde looked back at the cage. "You know, I'd stake my pension on the fact that what we've got here is the legendary Beast of LaMirada. He sure fits some of the descriptions of what the Beast was supposed to look like."

"Is there any way you could check that?" Caroline asked.

"There might be," he said. "I'm checking the computer files now."

Caroline didn't think the deputy was right. Talbot was supposed to have been locked in her aunt's cellar during that period.

Accessing the records, he announced that according to a forensics report from 1948, experts at the Federal Bureau of Investigation had determined that hairs found in one of the victim's wounds were canine.

"Mr. Talbot would certainly seem to qualify there," Clyde said. "If we can get a hair sample we can compare it to the one the F.B.I. had."

"Excellent idea," Stevenson said. "You go in with the scissors. I'll notify your next of kin."

Still reading, Clyde frowned. "I'm not going anywhere near that cell. However, according to this the Beast was considered to be a mad animal and not human. They compared him to a rabid raccoon or dog here. As such, it says that agents were within their legal rights to shoot him on sight."

"I wouldn't try that now," Stevenson said.

"Oh no?" Clyde said. "What're you going to do—put him on the witness stand?"

"If he's charged with a crime, yes," Stevenson said. "First, we haven't established that Lawrence Talbot is the Beast of LaMirada. Second, we

have in our possession information that the F.B.I. didn't have—namely that Talbot spends a great deal of his time as a human. He is certainly not a mad dog who has to be destroyed. Third, we have to determine whether this is a physiological or psychological condition. If his problem is psychological then Mr. Talbot may be insane and eligible for the protective custody of an asylum."

Caroline didn't bother to tell the men that the discussion was academic, since she didn't think bullets would have any effect on the Wolf Man. However, she did suggest that they might try firing different kinds of tranquilizers into him.

Stevenson nixed that plan as well.

"You should know, Doctor, that we have no way of knowing how he might react to different kinds of sedatives. Apart from not wanting to harm him, we don't want a lawsuit from the family."

"You don't have to worry about that," Clyde said. "There isn't any family."

Caroline fired him a look. "How do you know that?"

"One of the things that Trooper Willis was doing this afternoon was requesting information about the Talbot family. Records were faxed over from Llanwelly Village, Wales, and Los Angeles."

"Deputy, can I see those documents?" Caroline asked.

Clyde shrugged. "Don't see why not. Got them here on my desk."

Caroline walked over and Clyde handed her a thin stack of papers. Behind them, the Wolf Man was silent and still, watching and waiting. It was strange, Caroline thought. She never considered how much patience a predator required—the willingness to wait for prey to come, do something to cause it to panic, drive it to make a mistake.

"Talbot's great-grandparents Martin and Elizabeth are *very* dead," Stevenson said, reading over her shoulder. "They died in Llanwelly Village in 1837 and 1845, respectively. His grandparents Lawrence and Anne are dead. Talbot's father, Sir John, is also dead. Brother, John, Jr., dead. Mother, Cleva Creighton Tull of North Hollywood, dead since 1943. No living relatives by that name."

"I'm curious about the estate in Wales," Caroline said.

Stevenson pointed to a small line at the bottom. “They always put family history first on these things, holdings second. It says here the property went into receivership in 1950. Nothing about its current status.”

“We’re running a name search through census records in other cities,” Clyde said. “So far, nothing’s turned up.”

“I promise you,” Stevenson said, looking at the printout, “if we do something to harm Mr. Talbot, some long-lost cousin will come calling.”

Caroline turned to the next page, Talbot’s birth certificate.

“Deputy?” Stevenson said. “Looks to me like you’ve got a problem.”

“Why do you say that?” Clyde asked.

“Because it says here that Lawrence Stewart Talbot was born in 1910. The man in that jail cell is definitely not an individual nearly ninety years of age.”

“Yeah, we’re checking that,” Clyde said. “We figure it’s a transmission error. Probably should say 1940.”

“I don’t agree,” Caroline said. She was unnerved but also gratified to see that there was evidence to support the story Talbot had told her. “I believe that Lawrence Talbot may well be eighty-eight years old. That he is what he claims to be, a werewolf, and that tomorrow morning he’s going to return to his human form—just like he did last night.” She flipped the rest of the papers, which were records of employment and immigration. “When he does, I’m going to ask to have him incarcerated in a secure environment, but one to which I must have full access. No one’s going to believe me, so I want both of you to back me up.”

“Like they’ll believe us?” Clyde said. “Even if I had a video camera, they’d think we staged this.”

“We’ll make them believe,” Caroline said. “We have to.”

“Why?” Stevenson asked.

“Because I very much want to help him,” Caroline said. “Because what you said a few minutes ago is correct, Mr. Stevenson. In many ways Lawrence Talbot is still a man.” She glanced toward the cell. “Perhaps he’s the first of a new kind of man—a survivor.”

“A new man?” Clyde said. “He’s more like a throwback.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Caroline said. “In either case, we’ve got a remarkable opportunity to learn. In this state, what he refers to as his ‘spell,’ he’s much stronger than we are. His senses are more acute than ours. So are his reflexes, his balance. He could stand right beside you in the dark and you wouldn’t know he was there. I know. He did it to me last night. And his natural life expectancy is definitely longer than ours. He says he has to drink human blood to survive. Maybe he does. But inside, Mr. Stevenson, Deputy Clyde—inside he’s still very much a human being.”

“Oh, come *on,* Dr. Cooke!” said Clyde. “You call him a person and in the same breath you say he survives by drinking human blood!”

“His increased metabolism may demand it,” she replied. “We do, when we exercise. Or when it’s freezing outside and blood collects in the major organs to protect them, which is why our extremities get cold.”

“One big difference,” Clyde said. “We use our own blood to do that. He uses someone else’s.”

“He’s less efficient that way, more primitive. He also hibernates when he’s wounded, like a bear. But that doesn’t mean he deserves to be executed.”

“For God’s sake, Dr. Cooke!” Clyde exclaimed.

His shout brought a rumble of anger from the Wolf Man. A moment later the werewolf vaulted toward the bars, shaking them violently.

“Look at that!” Clyde said. “He’s a killer who’s going to keep on killing until he’s eliminated.”

“Or *cured!”* Caroline insisted.

The radio on Clyde’s desk beeped.

“Excuse me,” the deputy said to Caroline. Talbot was still rattling the cell, so Clyde put the call on speaker and turned up the volume. “Yes?”

“Clyde, it’s Willis.”

“Hey, Chief. You’ll have to speak up—it’s pretty noisy here. How are things going with—”

“You mean to tell me you didn’t hear that?”

“What?”

“The explosion!”

“No. When?”

“About ten minutes ago,” Willis said. “Hell, they probably heard the damn thing all the way up in Naples! I was wondering why you didn’t page me.”

“Mr. Talbot’s been acting up,” Clyde said.

“Then just lock him up and get over here,” Willis said. “The LifeSaver was coming back from La Viuda when it went down on the sandbar about a half mile south of Vesta Cove. Got the crew still in there, some ground casualties.”

“Holy Mother—”

“Yeah, it’s bad. The fire crew’s on its way, and Doctors Benson and Aubert are already here. But we’re already getting oglers and it’s a real mess.”

“I’ll be right there, Chief,” Clyde said. “You need anything?”

“I already rang the barracks for backup,” he said. “What I need right now’s a body to help manage things till they get here.”

“I’m on my way,” Clyde said. He punched the radio off and came from behind the desk. “You two heard that?”

Caroline and Stevenson both nodded. The woman stepped closer.

“I’ll come with you,” she said. “You may need a doctor—”

“Thanks,” Clyde said, “but Benson and old Doc Aubert are both from the hospital and they’ve probably got their own people on the job. I appreciate the thought, though.”

“How many people are usually onboard?” Stevenson asked.

“LifeSaver flies with a crew of three,” he said. He went to the door, got his wide-brimmed hat from the coatrack, and pushed it on his head. “And when he left before, the chief told me they had one patient.”

“Which patient?” Caroline asked. A chill crept down her arms. The helicopter had been on her island.

“A big fellah,” Clyde said. “Must’ve been the one you and Talbot saw.”

“Was he . . . still alive?”

“They weren’t clear about that when they found him,” Clyde answered. “I’ll let you know when I can. Tom, would you lock the door behind me? I

don’t want anyone coming in and seeing Mr. Talbot.”

“Understood,” Stevenson said.

Clyde yanked open the door. As he did he stepped back, surprised. Caroline was also startled.

A man was standing in the doorway. He stood slightly over six feet tall and was dressed in formal attire. He had an aristocratic bearing, a pasty complexion, and the most compelling eyes Caroline had ever seen. There was something at once sensual and very cold about them. She found it difficult to look away.

“Good evening,” said the newcomer, bowing his head slightly. His accent was Central European, his diction exquisite. “May I . . . enter?”

Behind them, the Wolf Man suddenly grew quiet. For the first time Caroline could hear the sirens in the distance. Then, after a moment, the werewolf became even more agitated than before.

“I’m afraid this office is off-limits just now, sir,” said Clyde. “Unless it’s an emergency I’m going to have to ask you to come back later.”

“I overheard you say there is a doctor present,” the newcomer persisted. “Might I come in and have a word with her?”

“Mister,” the officer said impatiently, “as you can hear we’ve got a violent criminal in there. I can’t let anyone in right now. But if you’d care to come back or else call the state barracks—”

“But I know that wild man,” the newcomer said casually. “His name is Lawrence Talbot and he is one of the children of the night—a werewolf.”

His pronouncement gave Caroline a small shock. It drew her from his dark eyes, from the soothing sound of his voice.

“You know about Talbot?” Caroline said.

“A great deal,” the visitor continued affably. “May I please come in?”

The dark eyes were on Caroline. She felt herself hooked and being drawn into them again.

“Yes,” she heard herself say slowly. “Yes, please come in.”

“Hold on, mister,” Clyde said angrily, “I don’t know who you are but I’ve got to leave and so do—”

“Oh, forgive my manners,” the newcomer said as he stepped in. He continued to stare at Caroline. “I am—Dracula.”

Once again Caroline snapped from the strange hold of the visitor’s eyes. “Count Dracula?”

“Yes,” said the newcomer.

Clyde fired her a glance. “You know him?”

“I know *of* him,” she said. She continued to look into the vampire’s eyes. Now they seemed to grow red and everything around them blurred. She felt her face tingle, the electricity traveling quickly down to her neck, to her throat. She tried to speak again but couldn’t as the tingling filled her head and shoulders, at once freezing her flesh and warming her blood. Within moments she was oblivious to everything but Dracula’s eyes—and his voice.

She tried to move.

Stay, he commanded, though not with words.

“Yes, Master,” Caroline heard herself saying.

Clyde was still looking at her. “What’d you say, Dr. Cooke?”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t.

The deputy trooper stepped over to the newcomer. Inside, Caroline was hoping that he would step between them. He didn’t. It was the last thing she remembered thinking . . .

“Mister,” Deputy Clyde said, “something very weird’s going on here and I want to know what it is.”

Dracula looked at him. He didn’t answer. Instead, the vampire reached his right arm across his own waist and sunk it into the folds of his cloak. A moment later he withdrew his ancient smallsword and slashed backward, cutting the officer’s subclavian artery and up through the trachea and esophagus. Clyde fell to the floor, clutching under his chin and gurgling as blood cascaded from the wide, gaping wound. At the same time the vampire’s left hand snapped out. His pale fingers tightened around Stevenson’s throat. The attorney gagged as he struggled in vain to pry the vampire’s hand free.

Across the room the Wolf Man rocked the cell more violently. Flakes and then shards of ceiling plaster fell on the green tile floor.

The vampire glared at the werewolf and hissed. Still looking at him, Dracula dropped Stevenson to the floor and stalked slowly toward the prison. His shoulders were hunched, the smallsword dripped blood at his side. He held his left hand in front of him; the thumb and first two fingers were extended, hooked slightly and taut. The last two fingers were curled like the talons of a bat.

"You would like to reach me, wouldn't you—Talbot?" The vampire snarled after pronouncing the hated name.

The werewolf thrust his shaggy arms through the bars.

The vampire stopped just short of the outstretched and trembling claws. "You would like to finish the job you began a half century ago, Talbot," Dracula said. "But that will not happen."

The Wolf Man splayed his fingers, withdrew his arm, and thrust them through again. Then he shook the bars once more. The top of the prison cell was now entirely exposed. Reaching up, the Wolf Man placed his feet against the door and rattled his prison violently. The bars were solid where they were welded to the iron crosspiece on top. Just below that they began to wobble.

Dracula looked up. The vampire's brow bent in the middle and he frowned deeply. "You are still strong, Talbot. You might have gotten free." He looked at the werewolf. "Might have, were I to let you live." The vampire approached the cell slowly. He turned the smallsword in his hand so that the silver-coated blade was pointing outward. "You want to die, Talbot, don't you?"

The werewolf roared hotly.

"You've always wanted that. And I want to help you."

The Wolf Man dropped from the bars. He stumbled as he landed on the broken cot and smacked it violently aside. He reached for Dracula. As he did, the vampire vaulted toward him. With the skill of a one-time cavalier, he slipped the sword point through the bars toward the Wolf Man's chest.

Like the wolf, the werewolf can smell prey up to four miles away. Both creatures can track a scent that has been exposed to rain, wind, and sun. In

close quarters, they can sense that an enemy is about to become active by the smell of sweat, the increase in body heat, the intake of air.

Dracula jumped toward the cell, brandishing his blade in his right hand. As he did, the scent of his perspiration preceded him. A moment before the vampire reached the bars, the Wolf Man smelled the blood-rich vapors. He moved to the side and was out of the way as the blade plunged through. Snatching Dracula's extended arm, his claws digging deep into the dead flesh, the werewolf pulled him toward the prison.

Acting with the supernatural reflexes of his kind, the vampire grabbed a bar with his left hand and locked his elbow. Stiff and unyielding, the arm kept him from being drawn toward the cell.

Still holding the vampire's sword-arm waist-high, the werewolf swung under it and faced Dracula. The vampire screamed as the werewolf reached out with his free hand and grabbed his enemy's left shoulder. Then he stood. The two infernal creatures stood face to face, snarling ferociously.

Twisting his captured right hand, the vampire turned the smallsword toward the werewolf's side. Slowly, laboriously, Dracula edged the slender blade toward the white shirt. When the Wolf Man felt the prick between his lower ribs, he released the vampire's sword-arm. Dracula quickly withdrew it. Just as quickly the Wolf Man reached out and grabbed the vampire's wrist. The sword was twisted in such a way now that Dracula could not slip the hand out from between the bars.

"You will release me!" the vampire roared.

The Wolf Man leaned his muzzle forward and roared back, defying Dracula's steely gaze and imperious voice.

Held tightly by the left shoulder and right forearm, Dracula struggled for a moment before he was forced to drop the smallsword. He managed to wrench his hand backward just enough to wrap his powerful fingers around the bars. The werewolf grabbed his other shoulder and now had both of them. As Dracula pushed against the bars with both arms, the Wolf Man braced his strong feet against the base of the cell. As hard as the vampire strained to get away, the Wolf Man struggled just as hard to hold him.

And then, pulled from the outside and pushed from the inside, the two bars between them suddenly snapped free at the bottom.

Startled, the Wolf Man released his captive. Dracula staggered back and then darted forward again with supernatural speed, making a hasty grab for the smallsword. At the same time the Wolf Man threw himself against the two broken bars. Both bars blew across the room as the werewolf hit them. Free of his prison, he lunged at Dracula just as the vampire retrieved his blade.

The Wolf Man stopped as Dracula spun on him, the smallsword pointing ahead. For a long moment the two denizens of the night stood facing one another, crouching three yards apart.

“I will not pit my strength against yours,” said the vampire. He began backing away, toward Caroline. “Your raw power is greater than mine.” Then, in one swift and fluid movement the vampire returned the smallsword to its sheath, spun, and swept the mesmerized Caroline into his arms. Sinking low at the knees, he sprang toward the recessed window on the wall above the outside of the cell. The vampire landed solidly on the ledge, facing the window. He paused there and turned to look back at the Wolf Man.

“We will meet again, Talbot. Very soon.”

With that, Dracula turned and smashed through the window. The Wolf Man leapt after him but failed to reach the ledge. As the vampire vanished into the night, the werewolf continued to throw himself at the window. He finally managed to get a handhold, though by the time he achieved the window and looked into the alley the vampire was gone.

Leaning forward on his strong fingertips and rising to the balls of his feet, the Wolf Man sniffed the air. The vampire’s scent had been diluted by the night wind and by the smell of the sea. But the werewolf located it, snaking off to the west. Turning his face skyward, the Wolf Man bayed his melancholy, territorial cry. Then he jumped into the alley and crept toward the street.

The vampire was undead, his blood unsuitable. Even if he could locate Dracula, the werewolf would still have to feed. Padding off in the shadows, his nose working constantly, the Wolf Man sought the scent of living prey.

SEVENTEEN

Trooper Matt Willis had never seen anything like it.

The crash itself was horrible, but he'd seen plenty of those when he manned a gun on a Huey Cobra in Vietnam. No, what ticked him off were the ghouls who'd gathered to watch the fire and take pictures for their scrapbooks and turn the accident into the season's social event. Willis directed several volunteers to keep people away from the scene, while exhausted fire fighters fresh from La Viuda were brought to the cove to battle the blaze. One of LaMirada's two ambulances was standing by, though the dour crew was not optimistic about finding their coworkers or the patient alive.

Willis was also annoyed that the always-reliable Clyde hadn't arrived yet. Willis had first phoned the deputy trooper nearly a half hour ago. Since then, he'd tried to reach him on the field radio twice. When the calls weren't returned, Willis went to his squad car, which was parked on a beach just south of the sandbar. He dropped heavily into the driver's seat and used the car phone to call the office.

The service picked up after six rings. "State troopers' line."

"Evening, Ms. Hutchinson—"

"Hello, Trooper Willis."

"I'm looking for Clyde," he said. "Have you heard from him?"

"Not a word, Matt. Not since he called this morning to ask me how I enjoyed my date with him. It was uneventful, in case you were wondering."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Hutchinson. I meant to ask but it's been a very busy day."

"I know," she said. "Come on over—I've got some leftover pizza."

“Maybe later. Listen, if you hear from Clyde would you please have him call me.”

“I will, sir,” she said.

Willis thanked her and hung up. His annoyance shaded to concern. Deputy Trooper Clyde could have walked here in the time since he’d first called. Willis rang the officer’s apartment, though he couldn’t think of a reason why Clyde would have gone there. The answering machine picked up after two rings and Willis replaced the handset. He absently dug at a worn hole in his belt while wondering where Clyde could be. If the deputy had been called out on an emergency, he would have radioed Willis or at least informed Ms. Hutchinson. Clyde wasn’t a drinker. He didn’t play the lottery and in any case was the sort of diligent worker who would have shown up if he’d won a couple million bucks. Even if his sick old mother had died, he’d have phoned on the way to her apartment. All Willis could think of was that the deputy had had a car accident.

Willis stood and looked out at a clutch of volunteers who were working crowd control. “Mr. Bevan! Billy Bevan!”

Seventy-three-year-old Billy Bevan turned. He acknowledged Willis with a wave and jogged over. The tall, fit former state trooper had been keeping a bunch of teenagers with lavender hair, baggy shorts, and camcorders away from the inferno. As soon as Bevan had left them, the teenagers moved closer.

“I swear, Matt,” Bevan grumbled, “they’re as dumb as they were when you were in school.”

“No, Mr. Bevan,” Willis said. “Dumber. Our heads were empty but theirs are stuffed with crap.” Willis took one last look down the sloping two-lane road that led from town. Clyde wasn’t on it. “Look, I’m going to run back to the office to see where my deputy is. Would you mind running the show here?”

“Not at all,” Bevan said, throwing off a little salute. “You need a break?”

“No,” Willis said. “I need to find Deputy Clyde.”

“Maybe he stopped by to see Josephine Hutchinson.” Bevan winked. “I hear he’s sweet on her.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think that’s where Clyde’s gone,” Willis replied. “Just hold down the fort. I’ll be back as soon as I find him.”

“Will do,” Bevan said.

Willis got back in his car and drove along the most direct route to the cove, the way the deputy would have come. There was some early evening traffic, mostly around the Venezuelan Volcano Club, the town’s one remaining hot spot, and the nearby Lewton Cinema, which showed low-budget exploitation films. Otherwise the roads were empty. There was no Clyde and no sign of a crack-up.

Seven minutes later Willis was at the town hall walking briskly through its empty, echoing corridors. Clyde’s patrol car had been in the parking lot and the trooper knew for certain now that something was wrong. He also had a feeling that Lawrence Talbot was behind whatever it was.

You’re a freakin’ jerk for leaving them alone here, he reproached himself. *Talbot is nuts. He said he burned up the Tombs while he was fighting a monster built from dead bodies. He claims to be someone who was born around the turn of the century. He was vouched for by a woman who—Willis’s instincts told him—had never met the man before she came to LaMirada.*

What Talbot looked and smelled like to Willis was an escaped criminal, one with an agenda. All day long the trooper had quietly been running checks on the whereabouts of Dr. Cooke’s family and friends. Using insurance records, he’d also had the records officer in Naples look into the backgrounds of her patients. He wanted to make sure that none of them had a record. The scenario he’d worked out in his head was that Talbot and a partner or two might have stashed loot in the castle years ago. Or maybe they’d heard that there was some kind of treasure there, buried in the cellar. Now Caroline was being forced to help them find it. If she double-crossed them, someone died.

The trooper slowed when he saw that the office door was open and the light was on. Clyde never left it open, even when he was there. Willis unholstered his .38 and held the gun beside his face, barrel up. He edged along the wall. When he reached the office and stuck his head inside, Willis no longer entertained the idea that Talbot was a criminal. The man was criminally insane.

Clyde was lying just inside the doorway. His throat was cut wide open and his gun was holstered. Clyde was a four-time Collier County Quick Draw Contest winner. Whatever had happened here had happened suddenly. Willis didn't bother to check for a pulse. Most of Clyde's blood was on the outside, spread in a thick sheet beneath him. The trooper stepped around the dark pool and saw Tom Stevenson. The attorney was lying on his side near Clyde's desk. His clothes were soaked from the overturned water cooler but there was no blood. Willis hurried over and knelt beside him. There were ugly bruises under his jaw but his pulse was strong.

Willis holstered his gun, pulled out his handkerchief, and mopped up some of the water. He wrung it out over the attorney's face.

"Tom! Wake up!"

The attorney moaned. Willis slapped his check lightly.

"Tom! I need you, dammit! C'mon!"

Stevenson moaned again but didn't move or open his eyes. Taking a closer look at the bruises, Willis began to wonder if his neck had been broken. That six-foot-four sonofabitch Talbot was probably strong enough to do something like that.

Willis spread the handkerchief on the young man's forehead then went to his cubicle and called the hospital. Next he phoned the state barracks. He reported the murder, put out an all points bulletin on Talbot and Caroline, and asked for reinforcements to help with the crash and to fill in for the late David Clyde.

The words caught in his throat. *The late David Clyde.*

Willis also called the coast guard and asked them to seal off La Viuda. If Talbot had been looking for something, there was a good chance he'd go back.

As Willis waited for the ambulance, he tried not to dwell on his own carelessness, the negligence—no, the outright *stupidity*—that had cost a good-hearted and dedicated man his life. Willis should have followed his gut that morning and locked Talbot up. But he'd allowed his instincts to be overruled by Dr. Cooke's endorsement and his own concerns about unlawful arrest. Now his colleague was dead, Stevenson was injured, and God alone knew where Dr. Cooke was.

God, he told himself, *and Lawrence Talbot.*

As Willis heard the siren of the ambulance racing down Roget Road, he rose and opened the equipment locker in the back of his cubicle. He selected a Winchester Model 52 rifle from the rack and made himself a promise. Deputy Trooper David Clyde would not die unavenged.

EIGHTEEN

Stephen Banning, Jr., had had it.

He'd had it with the soaking wet clothes he was wearing. He'd had it with the foul mood he was in. He'd had it with the entire damn day. But most of all he'd had it with the gawkers. The people, mostly teenagers, from LaMirada and the surrounding towns. If they wanted to get closer to a smouldering helicopter, let 'em. If they wanted to ogle at the cooked bodies, they could do that too. If they wanted to pick up burned pieces of metal or plastic or flesh, they could be his guest. Now that the fire was nearly out all the stonemason wanted to do was get home, take a long hot shower, and go to sleep.

He couldn't even muster a smile as he walked past one of the volunteer ladies who was serving coffee to the fire fighters. The round-faced, twice-widowed Helen Brown was the elementary school English teacher and a second selectman. If she hadn't written that article for the newspaper about how LaMirada had to forget its "weird past" and move on—that's what she called it, a *weird* past—then he might have gotten to know her better. But he couldn't go out with that kind of a woman. What the hell would they talk about?

Helen beamed at him as he passed. "Are you leaving, Mr. Banning?"

"I am, Helen," he replied with a tip of his Confederate cap. "I been helpin' to patch leaky hoses and chase away rubberneckers all night."

"You're a hard-working man," she said sincerely.

"I'm a whipped man," he replied.

"No doubt. And I thank you for your help, Stephen. This day has been quite an ordeal for all of LaMirada. I've been taking notes," she said,

patting her apron. “I want to write something for the paper that will salute the dedication and courage of our fellow citizens.”

“Now *that’s* a good idea for a newspaper article,” he said obscurely.

She continued to smile sweetly, her eyes following him as he shuffled past. “Good night,” she said.

“ ’Night,” he replied.

Banning shivered. He liked her but he didn’t trust well-meaning people. They were always trying to impose their sensible views on others. He didn’t want life to be so practical. It needed mystery and awe and a healthy respect for the unknown. Which was another reason Banning had decided to go home. He didn’t want to be there when the volunteer fire fighters and medical technicians from the hospital hauled out whatever was left of that giant. He’d seen him when he was thrashing about and he was a pretty ugly sight then. He couldn’t imagine what it’d look like after sitting in an inferno for the better part of an hour. And one thing he didn’t need were more nightmares. He’d had enough of those growing up in LaMirada.

Lord God, why are you thinkin’ *about this twisted damn creature?* Banning asked himself. He trudged up a grassy hill to the paved parking area the beach shared with Waggner Park.

Yes, Stephen Banning, Jr., had had it. He’d had it with this day, with his fellow LaMiradans, and with monsters.

He stopped by the door of his new, bright red pickup truck. He reached into the deep pocket of his overalls and withdrew his key ring. He climbed in and started the engine. He rolled down the window—no machine-cooled air for him—and backed away slowly, carefully, as he always did. He drove from the parking lot, which was crowded with the cars of volunteers and oglers. Then he headed down the sloping path to the two-lane road that led back to town. Sticking to the thirty-five m.p.h. speed limit, Banning headed back around the park to LaMirada town center.

There was blood in the heart of the town. Stephen Banning noticed it because he happened to glance to the left as he drove past the movie theater to see what was playing there. The blood was pooled at the base of a Dumpster beside Mrs. Bally’s Bakery, the only occupied shop in a failed

strip mall next to the triplex. The blood flashed briefly in the glow of a streetlamp as he passed.

"Ohmigod," he croaked as he put on his directional and pulled over. "Crap. *Crap.* God Jesus, excuse my Spanish, but why me?"

His stomach in turmoil, Banning hesitated for a moment. Sucking down a breath, he left the engine running and the door open as he crossed the street. He walked quickly toward the Dumpster. He hoped it wasn't blood that he'd seen, but jam or pie filling that had leaked from a trash bag.

It wasn't jelly. It was Mrs. Bally's blood. She was lying inside the Dumpster, her throat torn open like the neck of a Jiffy Pop. Muscles and tendons were hanging out and the bones beneath them were snapped and twisted in sickening ways. Her head was inverted, the top of it lying just about where her chin should have been.

Banning screamed and ran back to the truck, convinced that he was just inches ahead of something that was trying to get him. He slammed the door, opened the glove compartment, fumbled with his cellular phone, and punched in 911. After reporting the crime to Josephine Hutchinson, Banning screamed again and didn't stop until Trooper Willis had arrived.

NINETEEN

To a predator, death has many odors.

There is the scent of blood, which was what the Wolf Man followed through the trees and fields of Waggner Park. Unlike the blood of the living, which only teases the nostrils, the blood of death fills the nose and lungs and clouds the eyes of those who encounter it. Human death-blood has a fuller, smokier body than that of the lower animals. The blood in his nose, the blood from the woman he'd slain, was such a smell. So was the blood of Dracula, which was unlike any other. Centuries old, it possessed a sour smell all its own. Whereas other blood smells dissipated after only a few minutes, the trail of Dracula lingered. Some predators feared the scent and stayed far away.

The Wolf Man relished it.

In addition to blood, there are also the variform smells of dead flesh. Flesh that has putrefied in the earth. Flesh that has been bloated and dissolved by water. Flesh that has been eaten by scavengers or burned by sun or flame.

Right now the Wolf Man smelled those as well. He stopped under a children's slide, which was wispy with the odor of young fear. His ears turned forward, he crouched low with one paw between his knees and one outside. He faced the dark sea and sniffed the air in a slow, methodical sweep. The smell of burned flesh came from a smoky area to the south. Humans were there, picking at the pyre. That region did not interest him. There, the dead did not move. The smell of decayed flesh came from an area to the north of that. So did a familiar scent, the distinctive rot of an old foe, the Frankenstein Monster. Dracula's scent trailed off to that region as well. That was where the Wolf Man had to go.

Once again, without understanding why, the werewolf set out after Dracula and the Monster. He wasn't driven by the same predatory urge that had forced him to kill the woman in town. It wasn't a lust of the fangs and claws. It was something deeper, like a half-remembered dream. But it was very powerful and it came on him whenever the vampire or his servants were near.

The Wolf Man moved from under the slide and crossed a fish-shaped sandbox and padded around a picnic area. Humans were sitting there, looking toward the smouldering mound. They were oblivious to the Wolf Man's presence as he moved north through the park, following the smell of living death. He passed by a shuttered old building, where a weather-beaten sign hung from two rusted chains: H-O-U-S-E-O-F-H-O-R-R-O-R-S. The smell of fear here was old and rich but it was not what he wanted. He continued following the odor of his quarry. It was almost overpowering as he crept toward a ledge that had been eroded by storm and sea.

He crouched on the precipice on his palms and on the balls of his feet. His knees were spread and his arms were between them. He stopped, sniffed, and looked at the cove below.

Dracula and the Monster were about thirty feet below. They were standing on a narrow, horseshoe-shaped section of beach, which was bordered by rocks on the north and south and by the cliff to the east. All around them were smashed rowboats, an old fishing vessel, and driftwood, which was partially swallowed by the sand. The vampire was helping the reluctant Monster toward the sea where a boat was waiting. Only the supernatural eyes of the vampire or one of his minions could have brought it safely through these waters to the cove.

The werewolf looked at the Monster. The Wolf Man could now see as well as smell that the Monster had suffered fresh injuries. His muscular arms were bare and charred. The bloodless flesh of his face and neck were also badly burned.

The werewolf's narrow eyes drifted. There were three others present, just one of whom was alive: a young woman. She was spread on her back across a large boulder. The waves broke against it and splashed over her hands and face, but she didn't seem to feel it. The Wolf Man looked at her for a long moment. He knew the girl. And something deep inside the Wolf Man

reached out to her when he saw her lying helpless with her hands in the water, her unblinking eyes staring at the clear night sky.

The werewolf swallowed a growl. He did not want the vampire to hear him.

Then the Wolf Man regarded the other two undead ones. They were a man and a woman. The man was tall, hairless, and dark-skinned, dressed in a white shirt and trousers. He was standing on the deck of the vessel preparing to help the Monster onboard. The Wolf Man had never seen him before. But the other woman, the undead one, was vaguely familiar. He had seen her recently—wasn't it a night or two before? She had been lying amidst shattered glass outside a castle. She had been Dracula's bride. Now she was standing near the cliff, hungrily eyeing the young woman on the rocks from a distance.

The Wolf Man looked back at Dracula. The vampire was standing on the shore, just beyond the breakers, as the dark-skinned man bent to help the Monster up a ramp. As soon as Frankenstein's creation was onboard, the vampire turned to the bewitched young woman lying on the boulder. His fingers splayed, he extended his right arm. Slowly, like a carnivorous plant closing its petals over an unwary insect, the fingers drooped and moved toward a point below the palm.

"Come to me," the vampire commanded.

Count Dracula's elbow relaxed slightly. Then it tensed again, throwing his forearm out, the fingers wide open. Once more they closed slowly.

"Come—to me!"

The woman raised herself stiffly at the waist. "I am coming . . . Master." As she sat up, she slid from the rock and stood in the shallow water. After standing hip-deep in the waves for a moment she walked forward, her eyes still wide and gazing ahead.

"Go on the boat," Dracula told her.

"I will . . . go onboard," the young woman replied. She turned slowly and waded toward the ramp.

The Wolf Man shook his head violently and made a low guttural sound.

Dracula's head snapped toward the cliff. His eyes found the Wolf Man's perch. The vampire turned his body toward him.

“Andre,” the vampire said, “get the girl aboard and settle her below! Then sail for home.”

“At once, Master,” Andre replied.

With the Frankenstein Monster standing safely on the foredeck, the Marya Islander ran down the ramp. He sidled up to the young woman, put an arm around her waist, and hurried her onto the motor yacht.

As the Wolf Man watched, Dracula drew his smallsword. His bride looked up from where she stood at the base of the cliff. Her lips rolled away from her upper and lower teeth, baring a pair of small, sharp fangs on top. She made a spitting sound and her fingers curled to claws at her sides.

It was not in the Wolf Man’s nature to know fear. With a rattling loud cry of his own, the werewolf flung himself from the cliff. He landed between the vampire and his mistress, his powerful legs coiled beneath him. He immediately flung himself at Count Dracula. The fury of the werewolf’s attack sent both creatures spilling into the surf. The Wolf Man managed to stay on top of his prey. Rising on his hands and knees so that his head was above the water, the werewolf pushed the vampire down and held him there. Dracula thrashed to get free but his limbs moved clumsily under the sea, his senses dulled by the water. Growling ferociously, the Wolf Man slid his right hand to Dracula’s neck and pinned it to the sand. With his left hand he grasped the vampire’s wrist and shook it. The Wolf Man wanted to get rid of the deadly silver blade before he turned his attention to Count Dracula’s chest. Before he tried to dig out the vampire’s undying heart.

The water wouldn’t kill the vampire but the struggle would weaken him. And if he transformed into some other creature, not only would the Wolf Man continue to hold him but Dracula would lose the smallsword. This time, the ancient vampire would not escape.

The vampire’s face was darkly visible beneath the water, distorted by rage and by the billowing sands. Maddened by Dracula’s defiance, the Wolf Man bellowed and shook his quarry violently. He felt the vampire resist, though Dracula was not his equal. He squeezed the vampire harder in an effort to loosen his grip on the blade.

The werewolf smelled Dracula’s bride an instant before she struck. He had already half-turned as she grabbed two fistfuls of fur on the back of his

head, bent her mouth toward his shoulder, and bit him hard.

The werewolf released Count Dracula's throat, reached behind himself, and grabbed his attacker by the neck. Though the Wolf Man's claws easily penetrated Mornay's burned and brittle flesh, her teeth remained in his throat.

No longer pinned to the swirling sands, Dracula shot up from beneath the Wolf Man. Furious, the vampire switched the smallsword to his left hand and tried to push it into the werewolf's chest. The Wolf Man was forced to release the vampire's right hand and dive deeper into the water to avoid it. Dripping with seawater, Dracula turned and stalked toward the ramp of his motor yacht and stood beside it.

Still clinging to the Wolf Man, the lamia continued her tenacious attack. He howled with anger and pain as the smell of his own wet fur filled his nostrils. It reminded him of the last time he and the Lord of the Vampires met in these waters. Dracula escaped him then—the only prey who had ever gotten away.

The Wolf Man reached over his shoulder with his other hand. He pulled at the vampire bride's matted hair and writhed violently in the water. But the she-demon held on, hissing her catlike cries while Dracula waited in the darkness. The Wolf Man could literally feel Dracula's blood warming. The vampire was waiting, anticipating the moment when the werewolf would give him the opportunity to drive the knife through his heart.

The Wolf Man would not give him the opportunity. He had had enough of these inferior nightwalkers.

The werewolf roared. The wail echoed through the hollow shells of the boats surrounding them. It was a cry that caused even Count Dracula to straighten and pause, a sustained yell that spoke of decades of animal frustration and anger. As the werewolf roared, he bent over and at the same time tugged hard on the vampire bride. He dragged her from his back, straightened, and for a moment held her above his head. Then he slammed her down hard on a broken oar still set in the rusted oarlock of an old rowboat. She struck faceup, shrieking as the tough, weathered wood penetrated her back and knifed through her heart. A dark spray accompanied the shaft as it emerged from her left breast. The lamia gasped desperately and wriggled and then pushed at the boat. Though the wreck

wobbled from side to side, it didn't tip over. She was unable to climb off the bloody stake.

The Wolf Man hunched forward and stepped around the squirming creature. Count Dracula seemed to show no interest in her fate. His eyes were on the werewolf. He held the smallsword before him, both hands wrapped around the hilt. He smiled cruelly, baring his fangs.

The werewolf growled softly and exposed his own sharp-edged teeth. He circled around the vampire in an effort to get between him and the boat. Following the instructions he'd been given, the dark-skinned man was setting sail.

The Wolf Man was about to attack when voices came from around the cliff. Dracula heard them too. The sounds of their struggle must have attracted the attention of those on the sandbar.

With a hiss that became a screech, the vampire turned from the werewolf. Before the Wolf Man could reach him, Count Dracula had spread his cloak and was flapping toward the boat on huge leathery wings. The moon was ahead of him as he flew away, beckoning like flame to a moth.

The Wolf Man bayed his disappointment at the sky, then looked down. He watched impassively as Sandra Mornay wheezed her last. Then he looked out at the receding boat.

Accepting the fact that Dracula had escaped him yet again, the werewolf ran toward the inviting shadows of the cliff and hurried to the north just as powerful flashlights poked around the crag from the south.

TWENTY

Five-year-old Marilyn Harris had been spending the warm morning searching for wildflowers to give to her grandmother when she stumbled upon the unconscious form of Lawrence Talbot. The big man was sprawled in the tall grasses near the baggage area of the abandoned train terminal.

Little Marilyn ran back to the seaside shack she shared with her widower father, Ludwig, who was a cobbler, his mother, and their live-in housekeeper. The housekeeper telephoned the state troopers' office and Willis came at once to collect the man. He was accompanied by rookie Trooper Inez Seabury, who had arrived an hour before from the state barracks. Together, they poked and pushed and finally managed to wake the dazed man. Willis informed him of his rights and then brought him to LaMirada Hospital in handcuffs; Talbot did not resist. He was placed in the three-bed room that constituted the psychiatric ward. The other two beds were empty.

Trooper Willis sat in a chair beside Talbot's bed as Dr. Ralph Benson arrived to treat lacerations on the prisoner's feet, neck, scalp, and back. Benson informed Willis that Tom Stevenson was awake and alert. Willis thanked him then glared at Talbot. The prisoner was sitting up, his right hand strapped to the iron bed frame. He was being restrained under a law that required the arrest of vagrants.

"So, Mr. Talbot," Willis said. "Here we are again."

"Yes," Talbot said, staring past him. He didn't want to ask but he had to know. "How is Dr. Cooke?"

"We don't know," Willis said. "She's missing. No one's seen or heard from her. Now, Mr. Talbot. You want to tell me how you got all those cuts?"

“I’m not sure I can,” Talbot replied. He was still staring ahead, poking gently through mental ashes. He rarely remembered events that occured during his transformations. But when there were especially vivid triggers, such as unusual objects or people, events sometimes came back to him.

“You’re not sure,” Willis repeated. “Were you drunk?”

“No, sir.”

“You seem pretty sure about that.”

“I am. I don’t drink.”

“Because you used to? Did you ever abuse alcohol?”

“No.” Talbot sighed and looked away.

Willis grabbed Talbot’s chin and turned his face toward him. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Talbot wrested his chin away. Even before the curse he’d never liked being manhandled. But he looked at Willis. He looked at him with contempt.

“You know,” Willis said, “I’m in a nasty mood. I didn’t get any sleep last night. So are you going to tell me what happened to you or am I going to have to charge you with the murder of my deputy?”

Talbot looked at Willis. “Deputy Clyde is dead?”

“His throat was cut wide open at the station house. I found him bone-white and sprawled in blood.”

“How did he die?” Talbot said urgently. “I’ve got to know—did the killer use teeth or some manner of weapon? And about the blood—where was it found?”

“Mr. Talbot, I don’t think that’s any of your business—”

“But it is,” he said. “Please, it’s important.”

“Why?” Willis asked. “You keeping a scrapbook of your crimes?”

“What if this wasn’t my doing?” Talbot asked. “Do you want to find the killer or don’t you?”

“Yeah, I want to find him.” Willis took a step back from the bed. “Doc?” he said over his shoulder. “You examined the body. Tell Talbot what he wants to know.”

Benson stepped forward. “Deputy Clyde was killed with a large knife,” he said. “The wound was extremely long and clean. He also had about three ounces of blood left in his body. The rest of it was on the floor.”

“Not on the walls?” Talbot asked hopefully.

“No,” Willis cut in. “Only our baker, Mrs. Bally, died like that.”

Talbot’s expression collapsed.

“You ever see a hot dog split on a grill?” Willis asked. “That’s what Mrs. Bally’s throat looked like. And her blood was splashed all over the pavement and the side walls of the trash bin we found her in. Now you tell me—why did you want to know?”

“Murders are like fingerprints,” Talbot told him. “Different people execute them differently.”

“That’s true,” Willis said. “So whose fingerprints are these?”

“I’m not sure,” Talbot replied. “But the ones on the deputy are not mine.”

“What about Mrs. Bally?” Willis asked. “Is there anything you want to say about her death?”

Talbot did not reply. He couldn’t—not now. He had to remain out of prison so he could try to find Caroline Cooke.

Willis paced for a moment. “Mr. Talbot, Mrs. Bally was a very good woman. She fed the homeless, sent cookies to orphans, remembered people’s birthdays. And Deputy Clyde was a very good man. He was the sole support of his sickly mother. Mrs. Clyde is in another room of this hospital right now under very heavy sedation. Before they put her under, I promised that I’d find out what happened to her son.” The trooper pulled a leather notepad from his back pocket. “Maybe it’ll help you if we take things in the order they seem to have happened.” He flipped open the cover and read from a list. “Do you know what happened to the cell bars, Mr. Talbot? Any recollection as to how they were broken off?”

Talbot shook his head slowly. Now that Willis mentioned it, however, he did have a very dim memory of the bars snapping loose—during a violent struggle, he seemed to recall. The vision lasted for just a moment and then faded. *A struggle with whom?* Talbot wondered. *And why?*

“The station house window was broken from the inside,” Willis went on. “Can you tell me how *that* happened?”

Again, Talbot shook his head slowly. But in his mind he saw a dark figure leaping toward it from the floor. A black shape clutching a fair one.

Talbot's brow darkened. *Could it have been . . . him? Could it have been the Prince of Darkness?*

"The water cooler was overturned and smashed," Willis said. "Any idea what happened there?"

"Yes," Talbot said, shutting his eyes. "I remember—someone stumbling into it."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure. Caroline, maybe? I remember it falling and shattering. But I'm not sure who knocked it over or why."

"Well, that's something," Willis said, writing down what Talbot had said. "There's something else I need to know. We found that eight-foot giant of yours at the castle yesterday—"

Talbot's eyes snapped open. "You found the Monster?"

"We found the perpetrator you described," Willis said impatiently, "but we lost him in the helicopter crash. He may have been burned up or washed out to sea. You mentioned some family, the Frankensteins. Do you happen to know where they live?"

"They're from the Tyrolean Alps, though I don't believe there are any living relatives." Talbot's brow creased. "But don't worry. You didn't lose him."

"What do you mean?"

"He can't die. He has to be destroyed. And—" Talbot's brow wrinkled.

"And what?"

"I'm certain I saw him somewhere," Talbot said. He had, but he couldn't remember where or when. His fists balled in frustration. "I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "I wish I could help you."

Willis regarded Talbot for a moment then looked back at the notebook. "We found an emaciated body in Vesta Cove, about a half mile from where the Harris girl stumbled on you. The victim was impaled on a broken oar. Looks like she was about eighty years old. Do you know anything about her?"

Talbot's brow wrinkled more deeply He *did* remember an oar. Also a boat. And a woman.

"No," he said to himself. He looked up, his eyes more alive than before. "No, Trooper Willis. She wasn't a woman."

"Pardon?"

"The woman . . . wasn't a woman." Talbot remembered her clinging to his back, biting and clawing. But she was not a mortal female. She was a vampire, a bride of Dracula. He had been fighting Count Dracula by the sea. He remembered the broken oar jutting up from the boat. He remembered holding the woman above his head and bringing her down hard. He remembered the blood and the shrieks—

"Dr. Mornay!" Talbot said suddenly. "Officer, that was Sandra Mornay, Dracula's mistress!"

Benson finished applying the bandage to Talbot's throat. "Mr. Talbot, it could not have been Dr. Mornay."

"I tell you, it was! I remember now—"

"No, you're wrong," Benson said. "Sandra Mornay died over half a century ago. My mentor, Dr. Aubert, signed the death certificate. He told me about that night while we were at the crash site. He told me about all the deaths at the castle."

"Dr. Mornay died but she was not dead," Talbot insisted.

Benson looked at Talbot then at Willis. Benson walked away, shaking his head.

"You've got to believe me!" Talbot insisted. He strained briefly against his restraint but the strap refused to give. "Dr. Mornay was transformed into one of the undead! As soon as she arrived at the masquerade ball I could tell that Count Dracula had infected her with his pestilence."

"What masquerade ball was that?" Willis asked.

"The one held here in LaMirada," Talbot said. "It was on the night Dracula tried to put Wilbur Grey's brain in the body of the Monster."

"Wilbur Grey," Willis said. He made a note of Talbot's reference. "You're referring to that shipping clerk who disappeared fifty years ago?"

“I don’t know what happened to him,” Talbot said, exasperated. “All I know is that the Count made Dr. Mornay a vampire like himself. She must have remained in her coffin all these years until he summoned her.”

Benson looked at Willis before leaving the room. “Matt, I strongly suggest bringing Dr. Werdegast in on this.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking that.”

“Soon.”

“I will,” Willis said.

“Who is Dr. Werdegast?” Talbot asked.

Willis told him that she was a psychiatrist.

Talbot looked down. “That’s what I thought. Then—you don’t believe any of what I’m telling you?”

“Except for what happened to the water cooler, no,” Willis said. “But Dr. Benson’s right. You should speak with Dr. Werdegast before we continue. Some of what you’re saying might make sense to her—I don’t know. And I suppose you also shouldn’t say anything else until there’s a lawyer present. Unfortunately, the only other attorney in town, D’Arcy Corrigan, is away.”

“What about Mr. Stevenson?” Talbot asked.

“He got pretty banged up last night,” Willis replied. “We assume that whoever killed Deputy Trooper Clyde attacked Stevenson as well. The doctor said that someone with a very powerful grip tried to strangle him. It caused serious oxygen deprivation. He also took a nasty hit on the head. He’s awake now and resting, though those two factors probably account for his hallucinations.”

“What hallucinations?” Talbot asked.

Willis was silent for a moment. “Frankly, Mr. Talbot, they’re the kind I’m sure you can spin a whole new fairy tale from.”

“But these aren’t fairy tales!” Talbot yelled. “What do I have to do to convince you? I’m not insane and I’m not making these things up! *Why* would I lie?”

“To protect yourself.”

“From what?” Talbot demanded. “Trooper, I *want* to die! I’ve wanted to die for nearly fifty years, to put an end to these nights of horror. But I’m not

the only one you have to worry about. You've got to tell me. What did Mr. Stevenson see last night?"

Willis tapped his pen on his notebook. "All right, Mr. Talbot. I'll play along. When Mr. Stevenson came to this morning he told us that last night he thought he saw a bear, or something that looked like a bear, fighting an albino in a cape." Willis was still looking at him. "What does that mean to you?"

"It's what I've been trying to tell you," Talbot said. "These strange things Mr. Stevenson saw—he wasn't hallucinating. The man with the cape was almost certainly Count Dracula. And the bear wasn't a bear. It was a wolf."

"We don't have wolves here."

"But you do," Talbot said. *"I* was that wolf."

"You? In a costume?"

"No," Talbot said. "Last night the moon was full and I underwent another of my transformations."

"Into a wolf," Willis said dubiously.

Talbot nodded.

"I've heard enough," Willis said. "I'll go and send for Dr. Werdegast."

"Wait," Talbot said. "Just listen. I didn't tell you this before because Dr. Cooke didn't want me to. She didn't think you'd believe me."

"She was right."

"But you must! Mrs. Bally—I almost certainly attacked her. The only reason I didn't want to tell you is because you need me."

"For what?"

"To find Dr. Cooke," he said. "To help stop Count Dracula and the Frankenstein Monster." Talbot slipped his shoulder from the white hospital gown and bared the pentagram on his left breast. "Do you see this?"

Willis came closer. "It looks like some kind of cult thing."

"It's a five-pointed star, the mark of the werewolf, the symbol of Satan—two horns upturned and the other three points inverted. The denial of the Holy Trinity."

"You're a devil worshiper—?"

“No,” Talbot said. “The wound was inflicted on me over fifty years ago by Bela, who was himself a werewolf.”

Willis didn’t bother writing that down.

“I was lucky,” Talbot went on. “Joan Raymond helped me die and then sealed me in the basement of the castle. I remained there until two nights ago, when the wall was torn down. Dr. Cooke was there. She saw. She believes.” Talbot looked down at the bed, his eyes ranging over the sheets.

Dr. Cooke. He suddenly saw her face, vivid in his mind. Looking in at him through the bars. And then—

“The station house,” Talbot said.

Willis seemed surprised. “What about it? Do you remember something?”

“Caroline was there . . . along with Mr. Stevenson and Deputy Clyde. I remember that now. But we weren’t alone.”

Willis began writing. “Who else was there?”

Talbot’s eyes narrowed. He saw the black shape and a fair figure leaping toward the window. Only now the shape wasn’t faceless. It was Caroline and she was being carried away by Dracula. Talbot thought hard—he saw her again after that. Lying on the rock in the cove. Walking through the surf. Climbing up the ramp—

“The boat!” he blurted. “She’s on the boat!”

“Who is? Dr. Cooke?”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “She’s on Dracula’s boat. We’ve got to find it.” Talbot swung his legs off the bed.

“Hold on, Mr. Talbot,” Willis said.

Talbot tried to get up but the leather strap stopped him. “You’ve got to let me go!” he cried. “Last night Dracula left with Caroline and the Frankenstein Monster. I see them now, sailing away from the cove.”

“Sailing where?”

“Out to sea. Caroline was in a trance.” Talbot shook his fists violently. He was angry at himself. “I should have realized this sooner. Caroline’s a doctor, just like Sandra Mornay was. And Dracula needs a surgeon to help him with the Monster.” He pulled again at the strap. “Let me out! We’ve got to stop him!”

"You're not going anywhere—"

"You don't understand! The Devil alone knows what Dracula will do if that creature is brought to full strength!"

"Mr. Talbot," Willis said, "the waters off Florida are patrolled by the Coast Guard. There's no way a boat larger than a canoe could have slipped in and out of LaMirada without being picked up by radar. And being picked up, the boat would have been stopped and searched."

"If Dracula's boat were sighted," Talbot replied, "then whoever investigated found nothing, I assure you. Count Dracula would have put them under a spell, convinced them that the boat was never even there."

"He'd have hypnotized an entire boatload of sailors?"

"Dracula has bewitched entire towns in his long and terrible career," Talbot said. "During the war his castle was protected by an army of the damned. Trooper Willis, you *must* believe me. And you must let me go."

"I can't."

"But you *must!"* Talbot tugged hard on the strap. "Don't you see? Caroline's in terrible danger and I'm the only one who can help!"

"Mr. Talbot," Willis said, "I'm going to have Dr. Werdegast come and see you as soon as possible, but that's all I intend to do right now. You can tell her all about the vampires and man-wolves and living corpses. The undead and the army of the damned. If she thinks there's any danger she'll let me know."

"There *is* danger!" Talbot cried. He tugged harder at the strap. "You've seen the deaths, the condition of the police station. How can you be so *blind?"*

Talbot's shouts had brought two big, white-suited attendants to the door. They unlocked it and entered.

"Trooper Willis, is there a problem?"

Willis looked back at Talbot. "Check the straps. I think Mr. Talbot means to leave us if he can manage that."

"Dracula means to spread his evil throughout the world!" Talbot shouted as the men approached. He continued to pull on the strap while with his free hand he tore the bandage from his throat. *"She* did this to me! His bride, the

one you think was eighty years old! She looked like a young woman when I fought her. And soon Caroline will be like her—a slave of the Lord of Vampires. You *must* let me go! Please!"

The attendants went to the left side of the bed and forced Talbot's other hand into the strap hanging there. Once that was secure they went to the foot of the bed and tied down his feet. Talbot struggled the entire time.

"These won't hold me!" he screamed at them. "Tonight I'll tear through them like they were flesh!"

Trooper Willis watched while Lawrence Talbot flopped on the squeaking bed like a landed marlin. "Oh no you won't, Mr. Talbot."

"I will! *Please!* You've got to let me go so I can save Caroline! *Why won't you listen to me?"*

"Because everything you've said is completely impossible," Willis replied angrily as he stood. "There has to be an explanation other than monsters—the supernatural. When you're ready to give them to me or to Dr. Werdegast, we'll listen."

Talbot fell still and laughed bitterly. "If only I *could* give you another explanation. But if the world were only what we see, then there would be no God either. Do you believe in God, Trooper Willis?"

"I do, sir."

"Then ask for His help. For when the sun goes down, Caroline will need it."

Shutting his eyes, Talbot tried once again to understand the sinister and bloody things he'd seen the night before.

Why him? What had he done in his life to deserve this endless torture? Yet worse than his own suffering was the pain of the image he couldn't see. That of Caroline transfixed and alone somewhere as she awaited the vile commands of Dracula. Curling his hands into fists, Talbot pretended that his fingers were knit together. And for the first time since Bela the Gypsy attacked him, Talbot prayed. Not for himself, not for one who was already unforgivably damned, but for one who might still be saved . . .

TWENTY-ONE

Tom Stevenson woke late in the morning after a dreamless night. As soon as he felt the pain in his body and in his mind, he wished he were back asleep. He moaned and a nurse summoned Dr. Aubert.

After being given an efficient but thorough examination, Stevenson lay on the hard bed in his private room, gazing at the white ceiling. He had no choice. Because of the tight support collar the attorney was wearing, he couldn't move in either direction. And Aubert didn't want to sedate him unless the pain made it necessary. The doctor told Stevenson that Willis might want questions answered for the investigation and didn't want his only witness unconscious.

Stevenson said he understood. Then he asked about Lawrence Talbot and Caroline Cooke.

"Talbot is under observation here and I haven't seen Dr. Cooke this morning," Aubert answered truthfully as he left the room.

"Could you be a little more specific?" Stevenson called after him.

But the doctor was already out the door.

Stevenson looked up. *So much for bedside manner,* he thought.

Unfortunately, the bright ceiling was a perfect screen on which to replay the horrors Stevenson had endured the night before. Talbot's metamorphosis. The cold, brutal murder of Willis. His own helplessness when the stranger turned on him. Stevenson was frustrated at how useless he'd been, though he took some comfort from the fact that a lack of preparedness was to blame, not a lack of courage.

When he'd worked as an attorney and activist for the nonviolent environmentalists at Greenpeace, Tom Stevenson used to get bashed around

quite a bit. He was pummeled insensate by angry lumberjacks who didn't give a hoot about spotted owls. He was clubbed by frenzied hunters who became enraged when they couldn't club harp seals. He was bludgeoned by Japanese tuna fishermen who didn't care whether or not they caught dolphins in their nets. Those beatings were the main reason he'd left Greenpeace to find his own peace here in sleepy LaMirada. To regroup and remind himself that not all humans were monsters.

Yet those attacks paled beside what he had suffered at the station house. The killer was fast and incredibly strong. He could still feel the man's powerful hand around his throat; it came close to lifting his head right off his neck. The only preparation that might have helped any of them was to be somewhere else.

Stevenson wondered if this could have been one of the "monsters" Caroline had told him about. He'd always had an open mind about the supernatural. He had to; he'd seen some pretty strange phenomena during his life. While piloting the plane during one of his team's excursions to the Arctic, he spotted what he could have sworn was a giant praying mantis frozen in ice. The insect was perfectly preserved and even from two thousand feet up it looked almost alive. Unfortunately, the icy tomb was covered by a storm and the specimen was lost. A month later, on an environmental field trip to California, he'd come upon a meteorite that actually grew when exposed to water. But until last night he'd never seen a man turn into an animal. Stevenson hadn't told Trooper Willis about the transformation because he didn't want to be moved from here to the psychiatric ward alongside Talbot. He'd only told Willis that he thought he saw the cloaked killer fighting a bear—which was strange enough. What he *had* seen was Talbot transform into some kind of monster in the jail cell. And it happened the moment the moonlight appeared over the window—exactly what Caroline Cooke had tried to warn him might happen. Stevenson and Dr. Cooke and Deputy Clyde all saw it before the killer arrived.

Deputy Clyde—

Before yesterday, Stevenson had also never seen a man killed. Of the three ghastly milestones he'd experienced last night, that was the worst. Stevenson remembered being dropped on his head when the killer went to

the cell to fight that bear or ape or oversized dog or whatever it was Talbot had become. He remembered lying there and watching blood run in thin sheets from the cleaved flesh beneath David Clyde's chin. He remembered the surprised, helpless expression on Deputy Clyde's face as he tried in vain to hold the flaps of the wound shut, as he tried to breathe. He remembered trying to get to Clyde and passing out.

Stevenson had had enough with being conscious. They could wake him up if Willis needed him. He was about to use the call button to summon the nurse when Trooper Willis walked in.

"The doctor said you were awake," Willis said. "I was just in talking to Talbot and thought I'd stop by. How are you?"

"I'm not too bad, all things considered," Stevenson informed him. "How is Mr. Talbot? And Dr. Cooke? I assume that since Aubert hasn't seen her she's okay."

"Don't you worry about the two of them," Willis said. "You just worry about getting better."

"Matt," Stevenson told him, "I am going to worry about those two. They're my clients."

"Not anymore, Tom," Willis said.

"Excuse me?"

"Tom, you almost had your head torn off. You need to take a long rest—"

"My head's going to be fine and Mr. Talbot and Dr. Cooke *are* still my clients," Stevenson replied.

His throat was raw and his voice raspy from the abrasions he'd suffered during the attack. He reached for the water glass on the nightstand. Willis stepped over and handed it to him, helped him drink.

"Thanks," Stevenson said.

Willis pointed to a bottle on the nightstand. "You want some of the painkillers?"

"Not right now," he said. "It's not my neck that's bothering me as much as this damn collar."

"Wait until the painkillers wear off," Willis said. "It'll be your neck."

"Jeez, I thought Aubert's bedside manner was lousy."

“Yeah, well, it’s been a shitty night,” Willis said. “Listen, I’ll come back later. We can talk then—”

“We’ll talk now,” Stevenson said.

“Tom, you’ve got to rest.”

“How can I, when you’re threatening to turn my clients over to that fee chaser D’Arcy Corrigan?”

“I’m not ‘threatening,’ Tom. And D’Arcy’s a good attorney—”

“For contesting wills and suing for whiplash and filing nuisance suits for big settlements and padding his hours,” Stevenson said. “There’s no way in hell I’m going to put Dr. Cooke and Talbot in his hands for what could be murder and abetting. Now talk to me. Tell me how *my* clients are.”

Willis frowned. He took the glass from Stevenson, filled it from a pitcher on the nightstand, and then set it down again. “Tom, I’m afraid your clients are not doing very well.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Dr. Cooke is missing,” Willis said.

Stevenson was actually relieved to hear that. When Aubert hadn’t answered him, he’d begun to wonder if she might have been killed in the attack.

“Did she go with anyone?” Stevenson asked.

“We don’t know,” Willis replied. “She disappeared about eight o’clock last night, right after the attack at the station house. I’ve got a team of troopers from Naples looking for her. So far, nothing. Not even a legitimate clue.”

“Legitimate?”

“Something other than what Talbot has to say,” Willis said. “As far as I’m concerned, that man is delusional and dangerous.”

“Matt, in both law and psychiatry delusions are beliefs a patient holds strongly in the face of invalidating evidence. But in them, there’s often a kernel of truth. What did Talbot have to say about last night?”

“Not one thing that makes any sense,” Willis said. “The man is nuts, plain and simple. Even Dr. Benson thinks so.”

“That’s not good enough and you know it.”

“No?” said Willis. He flipped open his notebook. “Fine. Let’s run some of these statements up the sanity flagpole.” The trooper looked down at his notes. “Talbot says that what you saw in the station house last night was a wolf and that the wolf was him. He says that David Clyde’s killer is a vampire named Dracula and that this Dracula took Caroline away on a boat. Talbot further insists that Dracula had as his companions an eighty-year-old vampire mistress who’s been dead for fifty of those years, and a hundred-odd-year-old monster made up of parts from dead bodies and powered by electricity.” He flipped the notebook shut. “If he’s not crazy, Tom, then I am. But what really pinches is that the law says I’ve got to look into his claims because he was a witness, crazy or not. So I’m off to do that now. I’m going to check with the Coast Guard and I’ll see what the coroner found out about our old dead ladyfriend.”

“What about the patient who was onboard the LifeSaver?” Stevenson asked. “The one from the Tombs.”

“We’re still poking through the wreckage but that fire was pretty hot. There isn’t much left in the way of flesh and bone, especially in the back near the fuel tanks, where he was. The patient was probably burned to death.”

“Just to keep the legal issues nice and neat, I assume you’re going to have Dr. Werdegast see Talbot?”

“I’m on my way to call her,” Willis said. “Now how about you taking it easy, Tom. At least for the rest of the morning. Nap. Watch some game shows. Listen to some of that New Age music crap you like.”

“Sure,” Stevenson said. “That’ll definitely take my mind off what happened last night.”

“Tom,” said Willis, “nothing will ever make you forget what you saw. Thirty-odd years ago I saw my best friend step on a land mine in Vietnam. I still see it when I look into my cup of coffee every morning. Pictures like that don’t go away.” He patted Stevenson on the arm. “I’ll be back in a couple hours. You want the bed raised or anything before I go?”

“No thanks,” Stevenson said. “I’m fine. And I’ll be finer if you promise you won’t call D’Arcy Corrigan in on this?”

Willis hesitated then nodded reluctantly.

The attorney smiled as the state trooper left. As soon as the door was shut, he put his hands behind his neck. Slowly and painfully Stevenson lifted his head from the pillow. He sat up.

Stevenson had seen enough the night before to suspect that Talbot wasn't insane or delusional. Nor did he believe that Talbot was dangerous—except, as Caroline had said, when the moon was full.

But the sun was out and now that Stevenson was upright his neck didn't feel all that bad. And he desperately wanted—no, he *needed* to know more about what he'd witnessed last night. Rising from the bed, he pulled off the collar and carefully rolled his head around to make sure that he could hold it erect. It hurt when he bent too far in any direction, but he'd survive as long as he was careful.

Slipping his jeans, green shirt, and jacket on over his hospital gown, and shoving the bottle of painkillers in his pocket, Stevenson went to the door. He peeked out; when the corridor was empty he headed toward the stairwell and another section of the clinic.

TWENTY-TWO

When he was thirty-one years old, Lawrence Talbot had listened from the shadows of a church crypt as Maleva said a prayer for her son Bela. To this day, he could remember the smells and sounds of the place. The moldy musk of the rotted leaves that had blown through the door in autumns past. The drops of pooled rainwater leaking between the stones of the roof and falling to the stone floor. The woman's frail breath and the sun-baked skin stretched thin over her bony cheeks and fingers.

The old Gypsy woman had spilled no tears that day. She'd spoken softly, almost with relief, as she mourned the werewolf whom Talbot had slain the night before with his silver-topped cane.

The way you walked was thorny, through no fault of your own, Maleva had said. *But as the rain enters the soil, the river enters the sea, so tears surround your predestined end.*

And with that, the long and difficult journey of Bela Blasko had ended. It had always seemed unjust to Talbot that the man who was the source of his own infection had died so quickly, so permanently, while he himself never could. Yet that wasn't the only irony in his miserable life. For as long as he could remember, Talbot had desperately wanted to have a father—a father's love. Yet within a day of returning to Llanwelly Village and to his natural father, Sir John, Talbot had taken a new father: the Devil himself. Perhaps that was Lawrence Talbot's punishment for not having honored his own father enough, however formal and aloof Sir John had been. For not having visited more or been there when his father buried his firstborn son and heir. Never mind that Talbot's own brother hadn't wanted him there. The younger Talbot should have fought that. He should have fought for the love and attention of their father.

Satan, Talbot thought. Ah, Satan was not so impersonal and remote. He was the master of indulgence, of vengeance, of sin. And though Talbot never saw him he knew the Devil was present every night, taking an active hand in the Wolf Man's fiendish labors. That was another part of Talbot's torment. From his very first lover, Hollywood High School choir soprano Joan Mallory, to Gwen Conliffe in Llanwelly Village, Talbot had wooed and used women to satisfy his animal desires. Knowing that Gwen was affianced to Frank Andrews, he nonetheless took her out to the Gypsy camp with the intention of seducing her in the fog-shrouded darkness.

Now Talbot was cursed to seek out women to satisfy his deadlier animal needs. When women weren't afoot he would kill men—elderly men, usually. Someone else's father. Maybe he would tell all of this to Dr. Werdegast. Perhaps Caroline was right; perhaps his problem was mostly psychological. Possibly other people could benefit from what they learned about him.

It would be good to give something back to society. He had failed in his one good ambition, other than to die. He had failed to rid the world of Count Dracula and the Frankenstein Monster. He wondered if that were another part of his curse, being unable to use his strength to stop a greater evil.

He asked himself again, in agonized silence, the same question he had asked himself so many times: what had he done to deserve this?

He had lacked the proper respect for his father and for young women.

Guilty.

He had been jealous of his older brother.

Guilty.

But he had loved and cared for his mother and he had been generous to his fellow workers at Browning Optics in Los Angeles. When he killed Bela in Wanderers' Woods, Talbot had been risking his own life in an effort to save Jenny Williams.

Were the crimes he had committed greater than those of the men who had started the World Wars? Did he really deserve this special place in hell? Or was he God's new Job, an upright man whose poverty, sorrow, and physical infirmity were designed to test his faith?

If it weren't for Caroline, Talbot would be content to stand trial and let these people kill him with their advanced medicine and science. But Caroline was in danger. Why should she pay for his sins? If there were a God and He cared for His children, he would let Talbot go to her.

As Talbot lay there, sinking deeper into bitter reflection, he heard the door groan open. He looked over with disinterest, expecting to see Trooper Willis or the psychiatrist or maybe even that newspaperman who'd come to the castle during the fire. It took a moment before Talbot recognized the long-haired young man dressed in jeans and approaching furtively.

Talbot's features brightened. It was Tom Stevenson.

"You're all right!" Talbot said.

"I'm ambulatory and conscious, if that's what you mean," Stevenson replied. "I've got the world's sorest neck and a headache to match."

"I'm sorry," said Talbot. "I hope I wasn't responsible for that."

"You weren't," Stevenson said. "Neither was your shaggy alter ego, whatever that was."

"Then—you saw?"

"Oh yes. I saw." Stevenson looked at him curiously. "You don't remember any of what happened?"

Talbot shook his head. "Once the malignancy comes over me, I don't remember much of what happens. Sometimes memories come to me later, in pieces. But I try not to think about them."

"I understand," Stevenson said. Careful not to make any sudden moves that might strain his neck, Stevenson lowered himself onto the edge of the bed. He frowned when he noticed the straps. "Has Willis charged you with anything?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Talbot replied.

"Then I hope they had a good reason for using those."

Talbot looked down at his wrists. He turned his forearms slowly, the leather straps twisting with them. "I was angry," he admitted. "Trooper Willis refused to listen to anything I had to say."

"Matt Willis is a good man," Stevenson said, "though no one would ever accuse him of having a lot of imagination—or patience. But *I* want to listen,

Mr. Talbot. Last night at the station house I saw you turn into something. Something astonishing. I don't know what it was but I know I didn't imagine it."

"What you saw, Mr. Stevenson, was a man become a Wolf Man. There's no other way to describe it."

Stevenson looked into Talbot's sad eyes. "I saw it happen," the attorney said, "so I'm not about to tell you it didn't and that you're crazy. That's not why I came to see you. You became this creature, this werewolf—and you also saved my life."

Talbot seemed astonished. "How?"

"A man in a cape killed Deputy Trooper Clyde. Then he attacked me. He would have broken my neck if you hadn't gone berserk in your cell. You got his attention and that caused him to forget all about me."

Talbot's eyes brightened slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Stevenson. You'll never know how welcome that news is."

"It's true."

"If only—" Talbot said. "If only I could have saved Caroline."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Stevenson said. "You told Matt Willis that the name of the man who assaulted us is Count Dracula, that he's a vampire. Someone who lives by drinking human blood."

"He doesn't 'live,' " said Talbot. "He survives. For centuries Dracula has survived as one of the undead."

"Whatever Dracula is, Willis also told me that you believe he kidnapped Dr. Cooke."

"I saw him take her away on his boat," Talbot said. He added quickly, "But not to hurt her. I believe that Dracula needs a physician to help him rejuvenate the Frankenstein Monster."

"The Frankenstein Monster," Stevenson said. "That's the giant who attacked you at the castle?"

Talbot nodded.

"And now you're saying that he's tough enough to have walked away from the crash of the LifeSaver helicopter?"

“Mr. Stevenson, you have to stop thinking in mortal terms,” Talbot said. “Dr. Frankenstein’s creation was torn from the grave and reborn in the belly of a lightning storm. No force of man can stop him. Perhaps the Monster caused the helicopter accident at Dracula’s bidding. Once the Count has put someone in a trance, he can enforce his will across great distances.”

“I see. Then after the crash, Dracula came to LaMirada to collect the Monster. But why would he have gone to the station house?”

“To try to destroy me,” said Talbot. “Trooper Willis said that the deputy was killed by a blade of some kind.”

“It was a short, silvery sword,” said Stevenson.

“Yes, I remember a sword!” Talbot said excitedly. “And that’s proof Dracula came to destroy me.”

“Why is that?” Stevenson asked.

“Because silver is the only substance that can kill a werewolf.”

“But I don’t understand. Why would Dracula try and kill you when he could have gotten away?”

“Because he knew that I would follow him,” Talbot replied. “That’s why I came to Florida in the first place. I’ve committed myself to the destruction of Count Dracula and those who serve him.” His eyes fell. “It’s the only way I can atone for the evil that I myself have caused.”

Stevenson regarded Talbot for a long moment. “You know, Mr. Talbot, I believe you’re telling the truth about who you are and what you’ve experienced. God help me, I can’t think of anything else to explain what I saw last night.” He was still looking at Talbot. “But even if I could, I’d give you the benefit of the doubt. You strike me as a man of unusual integrity, Mr. Talbot.”

“Thank you again,” Talbot replied.

“The question is, do you have any idea where Count Dracula might have taken Dr. Cooke?”

“No,” Talbot said. “I don’t remember any landmarks. I only remember the boat leaving the cove and the Count following it as a bat.”

“A bat? You mean—”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “The ability to become a bat, a wolf, or mist is another of Dracula’s hellish abilities.”

“Then metamoiphoses like these are endemic to your world?”

“ ‘My world?’ ” Talbot said gravely. It was unsettling to hear it put that way.

Stevenson flushed. “That was stupid,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lump you with—”

“Dracula? But that *is* the world we inhabit. And the transformations are a part of that world. Shape-changing has been a cloak for evil since the Devil first took the form of a snake and tempted Eve.”

Stevenson exhaled. “This is almost too much to process. Maybe we’d better stick to the problem at hand. Do you happen to know which direction Dracula was headed when he left LaMirada? Was it north or south?”

“All I know is that he sailed toward the moon.”

“That’s something,” Stevenson said. “Let’s see. Dr. Cooke vanished from the station house at about eight o’clock. That would put them leaving the cove at about, what? Nine o’clock?”

Talbot shut his eyes. How long would it have taken him to pursue Dracula’s scent? To kill that poor woman whom Willis had been asking about? To reach the cove? These were things he’d never had to consider before. “Yes, that’s probably right,” he said, opening his eyes. “An hour.”

“Then the moon would have been in the southeastern sky. I’m a recreational pilot, Mr. Talbot. If Dracula went by boat and was heading south, then he was almost certainly making for the Florida Keys or the Morgan Islands.”

Talbot rose from his lethargic state. “The Morgan Islands—of course!”

“You’ve heard of them?”

“Yes,” he said. “I read about them when I was trying to determine where Dracula might have headed after leaving Europe. I remember thinking then that the islands would be a perfect place for him to hide.”

“How so?”

“They were an old pirate haunt where the natives still believed in voodoo and other black arts. When Count Dracula lived in Transylvania, he ruled by

fear. A land already rich in supernatural lore would have received him without a struggle." Talbot nodded with sudden understanding. "It makes sense, Mr. Stevenson. When I fought Dracula fifty years ago he escaped without the Monster. But time means nothing to a vampire. He simply went to the Morgan Islands to wait for the Monster to reappear." Talbot looked at the door. There was a clock in a cage above it. "Mr. Stevenson, Count Dracula cannot bear the sunlight or any other symbol of purity. During the day he must rest in a coffin lined with the soil of his native land. At such times he's helpless."

"I see," Stevenson said. "So if I went there and tried to reach Dr. Cooke while the sun was up—"

"Count Dracula couldn't stop you. But it would have to be done today."

"Why?"

"Caroline was merely in a trance last night." Talbot said. "Dracula would have fed before coming here, and he never feeds twice in one night. But tonight he'll drink from her throat. His blood will mingle with hers and his control over her will be complete—and eternal."

Stevenson glanced at the clock. "There might still be enough time," he said, thinking aloud. "An hour to get the plane ready, two hours to fly down there. Then I scout out the islands by air—"

"But just saving Caroline won't be enough," Talbot said. "If you succeed in getting her away, Dracula will come after you. He needs her medical skills."

"Then what do I do?"

"The Count must be destroyed," Talbot said. "A wooden object must be pounded through his heart, the symbol of the cross. But even that isn't always enough. If the stake is ever removed Dracula will be revived."

"What else must be done?"

"To make sure that Count Dracula and his spawn never return, their heads must be severed and their mouths filled with raw garlic. It has the power to purify the blood and the smell is repugnant to all the Devil's own. It will prevent any of his servants from approaching the body and attempting to revive him."

"I understand." Stevenson rose slowly, still trying not to strain his neck.

“Yes, I believe you do,” Talbot said. “But you can’t go there alone. Even if you find Dracula’s lair he’ll have guards or traps, probably both.”

“But you can’t come with me,” Stevenson said. “This is the last night of the full moon. What if *you* have one of your attacks?”

“Those islands all have bazaars,” he said. “There’ll be something made of silver we can purchase. Something you can use against me before it’s too late.”

“No,” Stevenson said emphatically. “I won’t kill you.”

“You may have to,” Talbot replied. “For Caroline’s sake. Now, please—we don’t have time to argue.”

Stevenson looked back at the door. “That’s true. I might be able to take you through the delivery entrance. The laundry and food probably have been dropped off by now. No one should be down there.”

“Then untie me,” Talbot said. “I beg you. Dracula must be stopped, not just for Caroline but for the sake of innocents yet unborn.”

Stevenson regarded Talbot for a moment. Then, nodding, he began undoing the straps.

Two minutes later Talbot was dressed and following the attorney down the hospital corridor.

TWENTY-THREE

By the time the shaken and exhausted citizens of LaMirada had collected into their midmorning cliques—the men at Jameson Thomas's Four-Bits-a-Cup Café, the women at Lucille Lund's pricier Coffee Bar None—Trooper Willis was already knee-deep in doubt. By the time the lunch special was being served at Albert Conti's Coed Pizzeria, Willis's confidence was utterly deflated. But by the time he called Kernan Cripps, the state trooper was enjoying the kind of enthusiasm that comes from being disencumbered of doubt and suspicion.

Commander Holmes Herbert at the Florida state police barracks had sent a Mobile Operations Vehicle to LaMirada to help coordinate efforts. The investigation encompassed several sites: the cordoned-off station house, the helicopter wreckage at Vesta Cove, the Bally murder scene, and all of La Viuda. Trooper Inez Seabury was based in the MOV, along with Deputy Trooper Rex Lease.

After leaving the hospital, Trooper Willis went to the MOV as well. He sat at a computer station tucked against the back wall of the van. Behind him, Trooper Seabury and Deputy Trooper Lease worked the phones and computers. Above, the air conditioning vents sighed out a stream of cold air. Because Seabury had had homicide experience in Naples, she'd been put in charge of the Bally, Clyde, and La Viuda murders. Lease had been a Navy chopper pilot racing Apaches around the Mediterranean, so he was handling the LifeSaver investigation.

Ordinarily, Willis's ego would have been badly bruised by their autonomy. Especially with Seabury being a woman and Lease being a rookie. In this case, however, their presence allowed him to concentrate on

something he desperately wanted to disprove: the details of Talbot's fantastic story.

Sitting in the contoured plastic chair, Willis brought up the files of the *LaMirada Good Times Dispatch.* The date: Halloween, 1948. Willis wasn't surprised to find that on that night there was indeed a masquerade ball held at the Ferguson Country Club. The next day there was a full-page spread featuring photographs from the bash. Talbot or anyone could have gone to the newspaper offices and checked the microfilm, learned details about the party. Willis felt vindicated when he didn't see any pictures of Talbot or Sandra Mornay. Then he noticed a sidebar about local impresario James Karl McDougal, owner of the local House of Horrors. McDougal claimed to have been bitten in the throat by someone wearing a wolf mask. The final paragraph quoted shipping clerks Chick Young and Wilbur Grey as insisting that they saw a "wolf man" as well as other monsters on La Viuda. Among them, according to the article, were the legendary Count Dracula and the Frankenstein Monster.

That doesn't mean anything, Willis told himself. They'd been to a Halloween party. The "monsters" could have been people wearing costumes. Or Young and Grey could have been drunk.

Shortly thereafter, Medical Examiner John Dilson phoned from Naples with something far more puzzling than whether or not Lawrence Talbot had read old copies of the local newspaper. He said that the body that had been brought from the cove was indeed that of an eighty-year-old woman.

"However," he reported, "according to computerized Interpol records on file at the F.B.I., the fingerprints of the deceased exactly match those of a Dr. Sandra Mornay."

When Willis heard that, a chill ran up and down his lower back. "Maybe there were two Sandra Mornays," he said. "Maybe the one who lived here in the nineteen forties was a different person."

"That's very unlikely, Trooper Willis," said Dilson. "The file that was sent along with Dr. Mornay's fingerprints says that she disappeared from Europe in 1947, apparently using a fake American passport. Polish officials were looking for her to ask about medical research she'd conducted in a Warsaw laboratory during World War II. The F.B.I. sent a couple of agents to her family castle in LaMirada in 1949, but she wasn't here."

“Did they ever find her?”

“They did.” Dilson said. “Six feet under, right there on the island.”

“I see,” Willis said. “Exactly what kind of medical research had Dr. Mornay been conducting in Europe? Does it say?”

“It does,” Dilson said. “Her work involved human organ transplants and experiments into the reanimation of dead tissue.”

“So of course she came to LaMirada,” Willis said. “What is it about this place that attracts people like her?”

“Maybe it’s the weather,” Dilson said. “Same reason the nutcakes go to Los Angeles.”

“I guess,” Willis said. “Tell me. Did you find anything unusual about Dr. Mornay’s body?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Dilson said. “For one thing, I found fur under her fingernails.”

“What kind?”

“I’ve only done a very preliminary examination,” Dilson replied, “but the hairs look like they may match the specimens we found on the Bally woman. I’ve sent the samples up to the medical examiner in Tallahassee. She can do a DNA check there. Also—and this one I’m going to have to go back and recheck, because it doesn’t make any sense—but it looks to me like Dr. Mornay’s liver, stomach, and intestines haven’t worked in a very long time.”

“How long is ‘very long’?”

“I’m talking decades, Trooper Willis. Frankly, those organs look calcified. Almost like she had advanced scleroderma.”

“Which is . . . ?”

“A pathological thickening of the skin. The point is, you can’t live with a case of scleroderma that bad. It’s just not possible. I sent tissue samples to Tallahassee as well for a more detailed examination. On top of all that there’s one more thing, though it may be nothing.”

“Let me have it anyway,” Willis said.

“I found bugs and dirt in her hair.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Willis said. “From the looks of her clothes she must’ve been homeless for quite a while. Maybe she picked them up living in the park and sleeping on the ground.”

“It’s possible,” Dilson said, “but not very likely. I do some gardening, Trooper. The bugs in Dr. Mornay’s scalp were termites—workers. You usually don’t find those aboveground. You find them digging tunnels in trees, inside housing beams, and also underground.”

“Underground,” Willis repeated. “How far down?”

“In these parts, given the level of the water table—which they have to live near—about five or six feet,” Dilson replied.

Willis thanked him. He hung up. Then he sat there for a very long time staring at nothing.

Dead organs, he told himself. *Reanimation of human tissue.* Dr. Mornay was a scientist. Maybe Sandra Mornay—if this was Sandra Mornay—had some kind of atrophying disease and she was conducting research into a cure. Maybe she *found* a cure and that’s what kept her alive in that condition. As for the termites in the lady’s hair, maybe she hadn’t been sleeping on the ground but in a ditch or up in a tree. And the fingernail fur? She could have been petting some dog that had also been sniffing around Mrs. Bally’s body. It was possible. Certainly it was more possible than the notion that she and Mrs. Bally had shared dances with werewolves. Or that Sandra Mornay was what Talbot had called her, a mistress of Dracula.

Still, Willis’s confidence was rattled. It was shaken just enough so that when the report he’d requested from the Coast Guard came in, Willis went from uncertain to downright insecure. Not one but two ships had picked up a boat on radar. The vessel had been heading from LaMirada due south. The first spotting occurred at 9:11 p.m., with arrival at the site occurring at 9:23. Another spotting and investigation came just over an hour later. Both times the Coast Guard crews reported finding nothing but open sea. The radar equipment was being checked for malfunctions.

The coup de grâce was delivered by Fire Chief Jerry Frank, whose crew was searching the helicopter crash site. The only remains they found in the smoking hulk were those of the three crew members.

“Whoever they were transporting from La Viuda was either burned to ash or else he walked away from the wreck,” Frank said. “And if he walked away, I don’t ever want to meet the guy because he isn’t human.”

By this time, Willis was beginning to believe that. He was also beginning to believe Talbot. Especially after he phoned Louise Brien at the LaMirada Historical Society. Talbot had had a key from the Hotel LaMirada in his pocket. Willis asked Mrs. Brien what she had on file about the hotel. She said there was some nineteenth-century flatware, several paintings from the lobby, as well as guest registers from the last twenty years of the hotel’s existence.

This is it, Willis thought. The moment of truth. He asked her to look up October 1948.

Happy to oblige, she took the portable phone to the basement, where the boxes with the hotel records were stored. She complained good-naturedly about the years of dust piled on the cardboard carton, sneezed several times in succession, then carefully removed the volume for 1948 and examined the yellowing pages.

“I’ve got October right here,” she said. “I assume you’re looking for some name and date in particular?”

“I’m looking for the name Lawrence Talbot,” he said. “Try the twenty-ninth through the thirty-first.”

“The twenty-ninth through the—ah! Got it right here!” she said just seconds later. “Lawrence Talbot. He checked in on October thirtieth and—well, this is odd. He doesn’t appear to have checked out.”

Odd? Willis thought. *That’s an understatement.*

Shortly after speaking with Mrs. Brien, Willis got word from Dr. Benson that both Tom Stevenson and Lawrence Talbot had disappeared from their hospital rooms. Benson said he had nurses and attendants searching the hospital, but so far they hadn’t turned up a trace of the two—nor any sign of foul play.

Willis wasn’t surprised, nor was he angry. To the contrary. With the burgeoning zeal of a convert, he phoned Kernan Cripps and asked about Stevenson. The low-keyed air traffic controller at LaMirada Field informed him that Stevenson did indeed take off three-quarters of an hour earlier. The

flight plan he'd filed described a short hop to the south, over the Morgan Islands.

After hanging up, Willis sat at his station with his arms folded. He thought of Deputy Trooper Clyde, of Caroline Cooke—and of Talbot. The whole story was impossible, unbelievable, mad. But there was no getting around one thing: it had happened. All of it. Just as Talbot had said.

Silently, he wished Talbot and Stevenson good luck. For there was one thing Willis knew above all. If the rest of Talbot's claims were as accurate as these, he was going to need it.

TWENTY-FOUR

The Morgan Islands are four balmy landmasses of which Marya Island is the easternmost and the largest. The islands comprise a total of 566 square miles and are named after the English privateer Sir Henry Morgan, the scion of a family of Welsh farmers, who was born in 1635. In his teenage years, Morgan traveled to Barbados as an indentured servant. He surfaced next in the chronicles of the West Indies when he received a commission as a privateer, a seaman who had been granted leave to plunder the commercial ships of Spain. By the time the Treaty of Madrid was signed in 1670—which in effect made all forms of piracy illegal—Morgan was wealthy and one of the largest landowners in the Caribbean.

The Morgan Islands were a special jewel in his crown and the reason for that was sugar cane. Beginning in the early sixteenth century, European explorers had brought home sugar cane from the South Pacific and Arabia. Once planted, the cuttings prospered in the Caribbean's warm temperatures and rich soil. By 1600, sugar production in the region had become the world's biggest and most lucrative industry. The natural harbors and warm, moist climate of the Morgan Islands quickly made them the hub of this burgeoning industry.

The stalk of the sugar cane is one of the richest supplies of sucrose—sugar—which is used by the plant in its metabolic processes. After nine to thirty-six months, the cane reaches heights of ten to fifteen feet. It's then harvested by machine or manually with a machete, stripped of leaves, and transported to a sugar mill. There, the stalks are crushed by heavy rollers to extract the cane juice. This juice is concentrated by boiling. The resultant thick syrup, called massecuite, is poured into a centrifuge, which has a sievelike basket at its center. When the centrifuge is spun, some of the syrup

crystallizes and remains in the basket. This raw sugar is collected and bagged for bulk shipping. Though automation has come to sugar cane-producing facilities throughout the world, it is still collected and processed by hand in the Morgan Islands.

After Morgan's death in 1688, his holdings passed to a succession of owners. In 1776, due to the chaotic conditions in the American colonies, many of these owners opted to sell their plantations in the West Indies. One purchaser who was not concerned about the political climate of any given era was Count Dracula. Through the firm of Frye and Sons, Solicitors, of London, Dracula quietly began buying land on Marya Island. By the end of the nineteenth century he owned it from shore to shore. He also bought all the private property on the three smaller islands, La Riana, Ottola, and Polo, which trailed westward like a scorpion's tail. While the United States had dominion over Marya, the other three islands belonged to Great Britain.

In 1932, a tall, devilishly goateed *houngan* named Murder Legendre from Haiti had washed up on the shores of Marya Island. According to local legend, the voodoo priest had been thrown into the sea by a fellow plantation owner who had been victimized by his occult powers. But the *houngan* could not die, and during the next two years he resumed his practice of the black arts. Using the resurrectional properties of bagasse, a by-product of the sugar cane refining process, Legendre began building an army of zombie workers like the one he had commanded in Port-au-Prince. When Dracula arrived in 1934, he decapitated the *houngan* after forcing him to reveal his secrets. Dracula took control of Andre, who ran the sugar cane operation. To ensure that no one else ever became so powerful in the voodoo realm, Dracula made regular trips to Marya. After the events in LaMirada, he made the island his home.

Seen from the sky, Marya Island looks curiously alive, like an amoeba. The swift-moving clouds cast ever-changing shadows over the lush, leafy hills, while the powerful waves create the impression of a living, constantly shifting shoreline. To the south, near the island's only plantation, a blanket of reddish dodder, "the devil's sewing thread," covers the hills. It crawls over the other plants and flowers, sinking rootlike growths into them and feeding on their tissue.

The nucleus of the island, Mt. Mord, seemed especially alive. Talbot first saw it from the passenger's seat of the Cessna Aerobat, shortly after noon. As they approached from the north, he was struck by Mord's sharp, eccentrically bent peaks. The mountain looked almost like the inverted head of a goat, its beard twisting away to the south. The sun seemed to skid off its tortuous ridges to cast impenetrable, slablike shadows beyond them. The ever-changing angle of the sun caused those shadows to elongate even as Talbot watched.

Talbot sat there scratching the armrests.

"Nervous?" Tom Stevenson asked.

"A little," Talbot allowed.

"About flying? Because if you are, don't be. I may not be able to turn my head around very well, but I'm really good at this. I've flown in all kinds of weather, even in the Arctic."

"Oh, I'm all right with flying." Talbot smiled lightly.

"Have you ever flown a plane?"

"Not personally," Talbot said. "But back in Los Angeles, a friend of mine, Dick Russell, had a de Havilland Tiger Moth biplane."

"Whoa!" Stevenson said. "A *vintage* Tiger Moth?"

"Yes," Talbot said. "It wasn't vintage—back then."

Stevenson's mouth twisted. "Right. You were there in the thirties, weren't you? I keep forgetting that."

Talbot smiled again. He stared out the side window, his mind drifting to a life that could no longer be his. "Dick was an auto mechanic. He worked for himself. He didn't have much money, didn't have a family—that plane was his girl and his baby. We used to go barnstorming on weekends. We took what he called the 'BC' route."

" 'BC'?"

"We'd go up as far as British Columbia or down into Baja California," Talbot said. "Those were carefree days before the war. Before everything." For a moment, Talbot could still feel that hot California sun pounding down as Russell put the plane through loops and dives. He could see his friend

smiling, hear his scarf flapping in the stiff wind, smell the tart, very distinctive odor of the petrol.

"It must have been incredible," Stevenson said. "I'd love to have flown one of those. No radar and computers, none of that fly-by-numbers junk. Just the pilot, the machine, and the air." Stevenson glanced at Talbot, who was still staring away. "Lawrence? Are you all right?"

Talbot blinked. His eyes were moist. "Sorry. I was just thinking about that other world."

"I understand," Stevenson said. "Do you have any idea what became of Mr. Russell?"

"No," Talbot said. "Before I left we talked about him flying over, but then the United States joined the war. Dick wrote to say he was enlisting in the Air Force. That was the last I heard of him."

"Sorry to hear that," Stevenson said.

Talbot began scratching the armrest again. He would give anything to be back there. Not just working in California and barnstorming with Dick, but experiencing joy and mortality again, his hands clean and his spirit light. He wanted to return to a time when women looked in his eyes with love or desire, when their screams were not from terror. When the world itself was not so . . . polished, was the word that came to mind. When there were still rough edges for a man to pit himself against. Rough edges that also helped to shape the man.

Things had changed a great deal during the years he'd been sealed up in the castle. Shortly before he picked up Dracula's trail in Europe in 1947, the Americans had just broken the sound barrier. That had seemed so exciting at the time. But when he and Stevenson left LaMirada, Talbot had seen a number of startling aircraft—slender, streamlined jet planes with engines that looked like rockets. Some of them looked as if they actually *could* go to the moon. Even the controls of this small plane, with their plastic buttons instead of switches and their glowing numbers, were far beyond anything Talbot had ever imagined. Yet none of that was exciting or heroic. It was cold and robotic.

Count Dracula had existed through all of these changes. Before facing him again, on his home soil, Talbot wondered whether the vampire would

have embraced technology or ignored it.

He'd have ignored it, Talbot decided. Talbot had never known the vampire to ride a motor car or use a telephone, to turn on a radio or fire a gun. And there was no reason for Dracula to do so. These things gave people that which the vampire already possessed: speed and power. But there was another reason Dracula would shun these tools. The vampire had contempt for human desires and curiosity. He scorned any passion or dream given power and urgency by human mortality. The things Caroline had told him about—new medicines, passenger jets, computers—allowed people to live longer, to fly, to communicate regardless of distance. Were Dracula to use these things it would not only acknowledge human achievements but also the needs they served. That was something the vampire's demonic vanity would not allow.

"Judging from your expression," Stevenson said, "I'm not doing a good job of distracting you."

Talbot managed a little smile. "You're doing fine," he said. The smile faded quickly. "It's just that—before that terrible night in the woods when I was attacked, I used to enjoy thinking about the future. Now the only pleasure I have is remembering the past. And it's a bittersweet pleasure."

"One that's got to stop," Stevenson said. "You *have* a future, Lawrence. When we're finished here you'll get help. We'll lick the affliction. You can start to put all of this behind you."

Talbot shook his head. "There's still Dracula—"

"And there's still plenty of daylight left," Stevenson shot back. "You've got to start thinking positively. We're going to make it."

"You don't know," Talbot said miserably. "I've been closer than this to Count Dracula many times, yet he's always managed to slip away."

"That won't happen this time," Stevenson said. "There are two of us. And we know how to defeat him."

"Don't be so confident," Talbot warned. "Dracula is not only powerful, but he can hypnotize most people between the beats of their heart."

"Then I won't look at him," Stevenson said. "Remember your Greek mythology? That's how you fight a Medusa."

“If it were only just his look,” Talbot said. He thought back to the few times, in mortal form, when he’d encountered the Lord of the Vampires. The last time was at the masquerade ball on LaMirada. “It’s also his voice, so smooth and comforting, inviting peace. Only it’s the peace of the grave. It’s also his presence, which can be electric. People can’t help but look at him.”

“Warning noted,” Stevenson said. “I’ll watch out.”

“And then there are his accursed wiles,” Talbot said. “When Dracula came to the masquerade party in LaMirada he asked Joan Raymond to dance. I tried to warn her that he was dangerous but he acted as though I were insane. She believed him and she was bewitched.”

“I imagine Dracula has learned quite a few tricks in—how many centuries has it been?”

“He’s existed for five hundred years,” Talbot said. “And there isn’t a lie or deception he hasn’t practiced.”

“Five hundred years,” Stevenson said. “That’s incredible. But you know what I find fascinating? If most men had Dracula’s powers and his wealth, they probably would do worse things than he’s done.”

“Worse in scope, perhaps,” Talbot said. “But Count Dracula has turned predation into a horrible sport. The way he selects his victims—the pride and prime of youth—then tricks them into opening their homes to him—”

“Tricks them?”

“Dracula can go nowhere unless he’s invited,” Talbot said. “After that he can come and go as he pleases.”

Stevenson made a face. “I was wondering about that. Last night at the station house he asked several times if he could come in. His persistence seemed like more than just good manners.”

“That’s Dracula’s way,” Talbot said. “The tease—the flirtation before the seduction or the kill. My point is that Dracula *enjoys* the trickery, just like the Devil, who made him what he is.”

The men fell silent then. Stevenson ignored his cellular phone as it rang inside his jacket pocket.

“I still can’t believe that people carry telephones around in their pockets,” Talbot said with a trace of disgust.

“It isn’t just the phones,” Stevenson said. “We carry our lives in our pockets. Credit cards, ATM cards, laptop computers, telephones, wristwatch alarm clocks. It’s all very convenient but there’s no rest and no privacy.”

The phone stopped ringing as Stevenson nosed the plane down to two thousand feet. It started again a moment later. Stevenson shut off the ringer.

“That’s probably my secretary or Trooper Willis calling,” he said.

“I feel sorry for Trooper Willis,” said Talbot. “I’ve made his life a nightmare and helped turn his town into a place of the damned.”

“My friend,” Stevenson said, “LaMirada was damned long before you showed up.”

“You keep forgetting,” Talbot said, “I first showed up fifty years ago. What I did helped to give LaMirada the reputation it has.”

“Then maybe what we’re doing now can help undo its reputation,” Stevenson said. “When we get Caroline back to LaMirada, we can do what she was talking about at the station house. Find reasons for all these things, your condition included. Scientific or psychological explanations. It won’t be easy, but we can learn together and then start to educate people.”

Talbot said nothing. He had acquiesced to their arguments yesterday. He’d let them put him in a cell, a cell that was supposed to hold him. It didn’t and he’d killed again. If they managed to destroy Dracula, Talbot intended to make sure that there would be no more cells, no more killing.

Stevenson glanced out the side window. “Look, Lawrence. The maritime traffic seems to be headed to the other side of the island.”

Talbot leaned over. He scanned the shore and its myriad inlets and jetties. He had to fight to keep his mind from drifting back, from dwelling on the bitter failures of a bygone time.

“That’s probably where the main port is,” Stevenson said. “I’ll circle wide and drop a little lower. If you spot the boat, I’ll let the tower know we’re coming in. If not, we’re going to have a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dracula may be living on one of the other islands,” he said. “Those islands are British and neither of us has a passport.”

“Oh, but I do,” Talbot said.

Stevenson grinned. “Yes, but it probably expired about, when? Two generations ago?”

Talbot frowned. That *was* one advantage Count Dracula had over him. All it took was a glance or the crook of the index and middle fingers for the Lord of the Vampires to go where he wished.

As Stevenson banked toward the east, Talbot turned his attention to the boats that filled the wide, U-shaped natural harbor. His eyes were drawn almost immediately to one of the vessels, a motor yacht nestled alone amidst the small freighters and pleasure boats. The yacht shined a clean, arrogant white in the sunlight. There was no one onboard and the other boats were anchored a respectful distance away. Because they *knew?* wondered Talbot.

“You can put one worry to rest,” Talbot said.

“You see his boat?”

“Yes,” Talbot said. “The sleek one sitting beside that freighter taking on sugar cane.”

The attorney contacted the tower and was given clearance to land. He made a tight turn to the south and swung the aircraft toward the field.

The airport consisted of a single runway, a small hangar, and a conical, two-story white tower with a dome on top. It was located on the southeastern side of the island, roughly a half mile from the harbor. Stevenson came in low over the trees, scattering flocks of mourning doves and horned larks. Talbot noticed that none of the people working in the sugar cane fields bothered to look up.

The plane gently rocked and bounced as it sailed in. It touched down lightly, hopping from the left wheel to the right before settling down. Stevenson taxied to a spot near the tower and, after securing the aircraft, went to talk with the airstrip manager. Talbot stood outside, his face turned to the sun.

For the first time in his life Lawrence Talbot felt the warmth of the tropics. The pleasant breeze filled the shirt Deputy Clyde had given him, made him smile. But only for a moment. For as he stood alone on the quiet field, his face and neck warm from something other than bloodlust, Talbot knew that the joys of this place, of being human, of sharing the sun with

Miliza Morelle or Joan Raymond or Catherine Cooke could never be his. Unlike Count Dracula, who regarded himself as superior to humans, Talbot understood that eternal, carnivorous existence was without meaning.

Stevenson returned quickly. “We’re all set,” he said. “Sunset’s at six-forty tonight, which”—he looked at his watch—“is a little over six hours from now. There are cabs out front. We can hop one to the harbor.”

“Caroline won’t still be on the boat,” Talbot said.

“No, I don’t imagine so,” Stevenson replied. “But I’m guessing that someone there might be able to tell us where to find the owner.”

Talbot looked up at the tower. The two men inside were looking out the window at them. “I have a better way,” Talbot said. “Wait here.” Talbot walked to the tower, opened the door, and went inside. He was gone for just over a minute. When he returned, he was wearing a wry smile.

“What did you do?” Stevenson asked.

“I just saved us some time,” he said. “I asked them if they could direct us to the residence of Count Dracula.”

“Why did you do that?” Stevenson asked. “They’ll alert him.”

“They can’t,” he said. “Not while it’s still light out.”

“What did they tell you?” Stevenson asked.

“That they never heard of him.”

“A lie, of course.”

“Not exactly,” said Talbot. “Dracula often assumes other names, such as Count Alucard, Baron Latos, or Dr. Lejos. So I asked the gentlemen if they would direct us to the master of the island. Whatever he called himself, Dracula would have established himself as that.”

“And what did they say?”

“They said they knew no such man, only this time they weren’t indifferent.” Talbot looked up at the window. One of the men was gone. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Where to?”

“The harbor,” Talbot replied. “I’m betting that by the time we reach it, someone will be there to meet us.”

TWENTY-FIVE

The harbor of Marya Island was busy without seeming to be hurried. Bare-chested, slow-moving stevedores loaded sacks of raw cane sugar onto the small freighters while fishermen returned with the morning's catch. Men in loose-fitting white shirts and shorts and straw hats offered the handful of sightseers tours of the islands on their motor launches. Their manner was easygoing, their pitches low-key. Because it was nearly lunchtime, food carts were beginning to line the jetty, with men and women selling everything from spicy pepper steak to soda from America.

Stevenson paused to buy chunks of chicken and onion on a stick and a soda.

"Do you want anything?" he asked Talbot.

"Thanks, no," Talbot replied. "I never eat—chicken."

The truth was, Lawrence Talbot had consumed nothing but human blood and flesh since the bangers and sauerkraut he'd wolfed down on the night he went to the Gypsy camp with Gwen Conliffe and Jenny Williams. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep cooked animal meat down. To the wolf spirit or whatever it was that possessed him, that would be the equivalent of cannibalism.

The two men made their way to the motor yacht. They walked slowly, making sure to point at it and make their interest in the vessel clear. No sooner had they reached its gleaming bow than a man approached, stepping from behind a stack of crates on the other side of the ship.

The man stood several inches taller than Talbot, about six-foot-six. He was dark-skinned with a bald head, tight, sunken cheeks, and large, rusty hands. He wore dirty sandals, an open white shirt, and ivory-colored trousers that reached to just below his knees. His chest was bare and

hairless. The newcomer also carried a silver smallsword stuck through his hemp belt.

When Stevenson saw the weapon he poked Talbot in the side. Talbot nodded. He too recognized the blade Dracula had wielded in LaMirada.

But what interested Talbot most were the heavily lidded eyes of the newcomer. They appeared to stare past rather than at the men. There was something unwholesome about them and he just now noticed what it was. They were dry; the man did not blink. Typically, the eyes of Dracula's slaves were red due to the excess of blood in their bodies. The dryness of this man's eyes, and the fact that he was abroad in daylight, indicated that he was enslaved by something other than vampiric means.

"Is there something I can do for you?" the tall man said. His voice was strong but monotone and strangely muted, as though it were coming from inside his chest and not from his throat.

"That depends," said Talbot. "Who are you?"

"My name is Andre," he said. "May I know who you are?"

"We're acquaintances of your employer. We'd like to see one of his guests, Dr. Caroline Cooke."

"I am sorry," Andre said without emotion, "but Gentleman Singe does not entertain callers." Andre pronounced the name "sang"—as in "sanguine."

"He'll entertain us," Talbot said confidently. "You see, I know who your employer really is. His name is Dracula. I also know *what* he is."

"You are mistaken."

"Fine," Talbot replied. "If you won't help us find Caroline we'll have to do it on our own."

"You will not trespass on any of the lands belonging to Gentleman Singe," Andre warned. His voice didn't change in volume or tone, yet there was menace in it.

"You don't scare us," Stevenson said. "I'm an attorney and I've had experience in international law."

"Have you had experience with wolves?" Andre asked.

Stevenson frowned. "Are you threatening us?"

“Not at all, sir,” Andre said. “I am warning you. The wolves roam the fields of the Gentleman. They roam . . . freely.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Talbot replied, “but I’ve had experience with wolves. We’ll be all right.”

“No,” Andre said. “You will die.”

Talbot fixed his gaze on the other man. “Not unless the wolves have silver teeth,” he said.

As Talbot watched, the expression on the Maryan Islander’s face changed slightly. There was a very slight dip in his thin eyebrows as well as a barely perceptible downturn at the edges of his mouth. It was as if he were undertaking an almost palpable, seemingly painful process of reasoning. It was followed by a visible relaxing in the shoulders, arms, and legs.

“I will take you to the residence,” Andre said suddenly. “The conveyance is this way.”

“Thank you,” Talbot said.

Andre extended a powerful arm. His finger rose slowly and he pointed across the old, uneven cobblestone road to a long, low-lying warehouse. On the far side of the structure, barely visible, was an old wooden cart. Hitched to it was a large black draft horse with an exceptionally long mane.

Moving with somnambulistic slowness, Andre crossed the road and stepped up into the driver’s seat. He sat down slowly as Talbot and Stevenson climbed into the back. There were no seats so the men sat facing one another with their backs against the dark, weathered wooden sides.

The horse snorted deeply and shook its matted mane. It started out even before Andre had picked up the reins, clopping along the road and turning right at the end of the warehouse. There, the ancient cobblestones gave way to dark soil and the road curved away through a curious collection of flora. These ranged from tree-sized prickly pear cacti to tall bamboos and palms. Lower to the ground were slender foxtails and bushy orchard grass. Insects flitted amongst them in thick, buzzing clouds. They did not come near the wagon or its occupants.

As soon as they were on softer ground—where they wouldn’t have to shout to be heard—Stevenson leaned toward Talbot.

“All right,” he said softly. “You want to tell me what happened back there? What made Andre change his mind?”

“I believe that Dracula was listening to what we said.”

“Listening! But how?”

“Through Andre. I suspect that even in his coffin Dracula could hear us.”

“Then he knows who we are—who you are.”

Talbot nodded.

“But why bring us *to* him?”

“So he’ll know exactly where we are,” Talbot said. “So he can have his servants destroy us or hold us until he wakes. Given how little time we have, it seemed the best way to reach him.”

Stevenson looked at the late afternoon sun. “At least we’ll have one advantage. Time to prepare.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Talbot said. “As I said, Count Dracula enjoys the hunt as much as the kill. I don’t think he’ll let his people harm us. He’ll reserve that pleasure for himself.”

Talbot looked over at the driver. He was sitting stiffly in his seat, his hands raised in front of him, the reins lying limp in them.

Stevenson followed Talbot’s gaze. “Speaking of servants, this man’s clearly not a vampire. He’s moving about in the sun.”

Talbot nodded.

“Then why is he like this? Is he hypnotized?”

“The islands of this region are home to a variety of voodoo religions,” Talbot said, “black arts whose practitioners use blood and incantations to raise the newly dead as zombies. I believe that Andre is such a creature.”

“How are . . . *zombies* different from vampires?” Stevenson asked. He was still looking at the driver.

“Zombies require no sustenance and no rest,” Talbot said. “They feel no pain and they can only be destroyed by fire or beheading. I believe they were originally bred as warriors. Later they were used as slave labor.”

Stevenson raised his ponytail off the back of his neck. He fanned his flesh with the other hand. “You know what the most frightening thing is about all of this, Lawrence? I can’t think of any explanations, other than the

ones you've given, to explain all of this. It's weird to think that what we knew instinctively as children, that there were things to be afraid of in the dark, was true."

Talbot gave Stevenson a reassuring pat on the leg. It suggested confidence, which he himself didn't feel. The farther from shore they moved, the more aware Talbot became that even in the daytime, the evil odor of the Lord of the Vampires permeated this place. It was in the strange character of the breeze, a warm air that disturbed nothing—neither grass nor insects. It was in the inexplicable lack of color, as though the foliage and the water and even the sky had been suffused with gray. It was in the musty smell that stuck in the nostrils, the scent of rot—of death.

As soon as the horse reached the dirt path it slowed down. The men could have walked as fast as the cart was traveling. Talbot felt eyes on them as they moved past the field of sugar cane—pale, cruel eyes. Wolf-eyes. After a few minutes the road turned north into the sprawling fields of sugar cane. There was no fence or wall between the fields and the plantation. There was clearly no need for one: the eyes were still upon them. Occasionally, Talbot would see workers cutting stalks with machetes, the same people he and Stevenson had seen from the air. The wolves did not bother them. The men and women were cutting the stalks close to the ground and stacking them on burlap sheets. Like the wolves, the workers moved with slow fluidity, apparently unaffected by exhaustion or heat. Talbot was sure that if he got close enough to look into their eyes he'd see the same parched deadness he saw in Andre's gaze.

Stevenson didn't appear to see the wolf-eyes or notice anything unusual about the workers. He was looking ahead, through the tall sugar cane, toward the distant plantation. The attorney's body was in nearly constant motion though he was probably unaware of it. After sitting still for a moment he would anxiously move a hand or recross his legs or shift his body to a new position.

Talbot was concerned for Tom Stevenson's safety. He was also worried about Caroline. She had to be located and taken away quickly. Otherwise, she and Stevenson would be facing at least two of the most malevolent spirits on earth—three if the Frankenstein Monster were also here. Talbot

resisted the urge to look at Stevenson's right palm. He didn't want to know if the pentagram were there or not.

The house of Dracula loomed as the cart came around the field of cane. Like its owner, the plantation was born of another time. There was a large, flat roof and an off-white wooden portico that ran the length of the three-story structure. Eight columns fronted the mansion's first floor and large bow windows dominated each side. Hanging just above the double doors were two lanterns with amber-colored panes and scalloped, black iron wings that swept from the outsides of each. A large guest house—probably used once to house slaves—was visible through the knotted braids of strangler figs to the east. Barely visible in the valley beyond was what appeared to be the top of the sugar mill. In the distance, to the west, the asymmetric Mt. Mord loomed tall and cold.

"This is quite a place," Stevenson said. He looked ahead anxiously. "Well, Mr. Talbot? Exactly what kind of welcome *can* we expect from 'Gentleman Singe'? Some of those wolves we were warned about? Zombies?"

"I'm not sure," Talbot admitted. "Count Dracula has been known to set very comfortable traps. He's also capable of arranging unpleasant welcomes. Whatever he does, the first thing we should do is use branches or pieces of wood to make crosses. We can use those to keep him at bay. We'll also need to find wood to use as a stake." He nodded toward the mill. "There, probably."

"I wish there'd been time to make some of the preparations back at the harbor," Stevenson remarked.

"If we'd armed ourselves there, Dracula might not have allowed us to get this close," Talbot pointed out. "Dracula is powerful—but he's also cautious."

"Good point," Stevenson said. "Tell me something, before we face him. Exactly how does Dracula control people? I mean—assuming one doesn't look at him, what else can he do to make someone his slave?"

"He bites them and infects them with his blood," Talbot said. "He makes two puncture wounds, usually in the throat. As he draws the blood of his

victim, he salivates his own blood into the wound. Through it, he controls them."

"Permanently?"

"Most victims can still be reclaimed after a night or two," Talbot said. "They still possess enough of their own blood. After that, they bccome vampires and must drink the blood of others, just as Count Dracula does. Then their victims also become slaves of Dracula."

"So the object, then, is for one of us to keep Dracula at bay with the cross while the other person . . . impales him." The word stuck in his throat.

"If we can do that, yes," Talbot said. "We must seize any opportunity to destroy him. Hopefully, we'll be able to search for Dracula's coffin while it's still light. Perhaps we can strike before he rises."

The wagon rolled slowly up to the imposing house. It didn't stop but continued past the mansion, past the dark guest house and down into the misty valley. There, it followed the winding and rutted dirt path until it reached the mill where the sugar cane was processed.

The mill was a long building whose sagging wooden roof was literally a continuation of the earthen ledge above it. The mill walls were made of stone with high, smoke-blackened stone chimneys on the narrower north and south sides. A river coursed along the west side of the building, behind it, and there was a large wooden door in the middle of the east wall. The door was open and two men with machetes stood on either side of it. Both of them were Caucasian and nearly as tall as Andre. They were muscular and had longish, unkempt hair. They walked over as the wagon came to a stop. The pack of wolves also showed themselves, four of them moving silently from the cane, which grew almost to the south side of the mill.

"Jesus," Stevenson said as the large, gray carnivores approached. "Does Dracula control them too?"

"Not while he's at rest," Talbot said.

"What do we do? How do we act?"

"Move as slowly as possible," Talbot said. "See how they're standing? Their tails are up and their heads are down. That's a challenge. Don't even make eye contact with them or they may perceive it as a threat."

Stevenson acknowledged with a nervous nod. With labored slowness he followed Talbot from the back of the wagon.

Moving at the same languid pace as before, Andre put down the reins. He slid from his seat, as oblivious to the wolves as they seemed to him. He walked toward the men and stopped when he reached Talbot's side. He pointed to the men with the machetes.

"Go with them," he commanded.

"Come on," Talbot said to Stevenson. "Slowly."

Talbot and Stevenson began walking forward. As they did, the two men fell in next to them, one on either side. They moved with the same lazy motions as Andre. Behind them, the wolves padded even closer. Talbot could feel their breath on his hands. He was proud of Tom Stevenson; despite the way his arms and jaw were trembling, he kept his shoulders back and maintained his slow and steady gait.

As Talbot neared the door, he braved turning to the left to take a look at the sun. With sudden horror, he saw that it was sinking toward the mountain. That was why Dracula had chosen this island and this spot on it: because of the mountain, sunset would occur at least an hour before it did elsewhere. Though Talbot would not undergo his transformation until the moon had risen, Count Dracula would rise much sooner than that. Somehow, they were going to have lo get out of the mill quickly.

Talbot and Stevenson walked through the door.

As it closed behind them, Talbot sensed that they were not alone.

TWENTY-SIX

The black coffin was made of highly polished primavera with heavy iron hinges and fittings made of sardonyx. It rested on a high marble base with three steps on each side leading to the moist earth. The coffin's white trimmings looked gray in the dark basement of the mansion, the only light coming from a lamp that was kept burning at the top of the stairwell. Spiders spun webs in the high corners of the cellar to trap unwary flies while rats moved through holes in the ancient baseboard. Despite the scurrying and furtive movement, all was silent.

The quiet was broken as the lid creaked and rose to the right. Long, thin, cadaverously white fingers emerged from the opening. Slow and wraithlike, the hand turned palm up to open the lid completely. Count Dracula lay inside. He was swathed to his eyes in his cloak, like a bat folded within its wings. A thin layer of dry, pale, dusty Transylvanian earth was spread beneath him. It was a glaring contrast to the damp earth of Marya Island and the rich white satin lining of the coffin lid.

When the lid was upright, it stopped moving. The vampire sat up, staring ahead, his left hand hooked over the side of the coffin. He turned, his thick, black eyebrows dipping in the center. He released the side of the coffin and extended his arm toward a darkened side of the room, a corner far from the lighted stairs. Steepling his wrist, the vampire stretched his fingers and then slowly brought them together.

"Come," he commanded.

A figure stirred. Her long, blond hair caught the light as she moved forward. Her arms hung limply from straight shoulders and her hazel eyes stared vacantly ahead. Still wearing the black suit she'd had on when she

buried her great-aunt, Caroline Cooke approached the coffin. Without breaking her stride, she rolled her shoulders and shucked off her jacket.

Dracula reached out his hand a second time, like a master puppeteer pulling the strings of a marionette. Caroline turned slightly so that she was walking toward the foot of the coffin. When she reached the steps of the funerary pedestal, she turned again so that she was facing the vampire. She stopped.

The vampire rose like a thick black vapor. Still wrapped in his cape, he stepped from the coffin and walked down the marble steps. He stood beside Caroline, facing her. The woman continued to stare ahead.

The Count put his right hand on her shoulder. He brushed her hair back with his index and middle fingers. His eyes fastened on the flesh above her collar. Her throat was wholesome and strong, pulsing with life. He put his thumb under the line of her jaw and a wicked smile grew on his face. He could literally feel the blood rushing through her veins. His own blood, still sluggish from sleep, began to stir. He moved his fingers down the back of her neck to her shoulder. Caroline sighed and shut her eyes as his left hand opened the top two buttons of her blouse. He freed her shoulder from the garment and looked down at the smooth curve of her neck. Though all victims were helpless before him, Count Dracula was less feral toward women than toward men. Of the thousands of women he had bled, he could not remember more than a handful who had not been drawn to him before they were entranced.

The vampire's smile had revealed two slender, elongated canines. The twin teeth pointed down like the tines of a pitchfork. They tapered sharply as they narrowed toward the points and then curved inward slightly. As the vampire moved his mouth toward Caroline's exposed throat, a film of rubescent saliva ran from his gums onto the teeth. Pin-sharp and moistened by the bloody saliva, the fangs barely stung as they penetrated the woman's flesh.

Dracula's right hand slipped under her chin and he grabbed her throat to steady her. Caroline's head rolled away and she held his forearm for support as the tingling heat of his blood mixed with hers. The two figures sank to the ground, she to her knees and Dracula into his cloak. His tongue worked in slow circles around the two openings in her flesh. He lost none of her

precious blood as it pumped forth. As he drank, he felt energy return to his body, strength to his limbs, acuity to his senses. When he was finished, the vampire tilted his head back, shut his eyes, and cleaned his lips with the tip of his tongue. Then he looked at Caroline. The puncture marks had closed, leaving only a slight swelling and redness around the small wounds.

He rose. As he did, he held Caroline by the shoulders and drew her up with him. When he released her she stood utterly still, save for the slow, shallow breathing. She was inhaling through her nose, her belly expanding and contracting. He covered her shoulder with her blouse. Then he moved his right hand in front of her face, as though his fingers were caressing her brow, eyes, and cheeks. Caroline's chin rose and her eyes opened and after a moment she smiled.

"Yes . . . Master," she said.

"You will follow me, Dr. Cooke," Dracula said. "It is time for us to begin our work."

"Yes, Master," she replied.

Dracula threw the hem of his cloak over his forearms so that it wouldn't drag on the basement floor. Then he walked grandly toward the stairs, followed by the spellbound young woman. They emerged from the basement into a library, which was accessible through a revolving bookcase. Andre was waiting for them. The *sarpe* shut the door as they entered the room.

The tropical humidity here was much greater than in the basement, but Dracula didn't feel it. Heat and cold had no effect upon dead flesh. But something borne by the muggy air did affect him, and the contentedness that had marked Dracula's mood in the basement crypt evaporated. During the daylight hours, when he was in his coffin, the vampire was insensate and unable to move. Now that he was awake and nourished, his senses were at their peak. And he felt keenly a presence that was familiar yet unfamiliar, dangerous yet not. The contradiction puzzled him. Yet this was not a student or tourist. There was malevolent power in the presence.

Confusion gave way to indignation as Count Dracula looked toward the foyer. The vampire's chest expanded and his face rose aristocratically. "Someone has come here, Andre. Who has dared?"

“Two men, Master—”

“Only one of them interests me,” Dracula stated.

“Yes, Master,” the *sarpe* said impassively. “I do not know who he is, yet he called you by your other name. I thought it best to bring him here. Vollin and Benet are guarding them.”

“You did well,” the vampire replied. With effortless pace, he crossed the two-story library to the door leading in the foyer. Caroline remained behind. Stopping, Dracula looked down the long, narrow hallway. He stared across the ancient hardwood floors, past the paintings and the precious mementos of his homeland. The offending spoor was stronger here.

Dracula’s black eyes narrowed and his upper lip curled back involuntarily from his fangs. How did his nemesis find him here, and so quickly?

“Our visitor,” Dracula said without turning. “Did he give you his name?”

“He did, Master,” said Andre. “He said it was Lawrence Talbot. He said he wanted the woman.”

Dracula looked back at Caroline and his mood changed abruptly. “He is still the melancholy knight.” The right side of his mouth rose in the semblance of a smile. “My sword, Andre.”

The *sarpe* walked over. He placed the hilt in Dracula’s hand.

“Watch over the young woman,” the vampire commanded. “You will bring her to me after I have dealt with Talbot.”

“Yes, Master,” Andre replied.

His cloak sweeping behind him, Dracula strode beneath the crossed machetes that hung above the door. Then he walked imperiously down the corridor to the front door. The glow of day was still visible in the sky. It would be at least half an hour before the full moon rose. Only on this night it would have no effect on Lawrence Talbot. By then his miserable suffering —along with his very existence—would be ended.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The mill had a tart and dusty smell, a distinctive aroma caused by years of sweet ground cane mixing with the seawater that was used to keep the millstone moist. The damp soil of the floor was covered with straw to help the laborers keep their footing. Skylights in the ceiling were closed now and thick with spiderwebs. They had been built long ago to provide light for the slaves who used to work in the mill. The air was extremely stuffy and still, heated during the day by the constant beating of the sun. Talbot had to admit that if anyone but a zombie had been forced to work here, the atmosphere would have been stifling.

The structure was lit now by shafts of light spilling through the two old chimneys. The ovens beneath would hold fires for boiling the cane juice, but they burned only at night when the tireless *sarpe* workers had harvested the stalks. In the center of the room, occupying nearly one-quarter of it, was a massive grindstone nearly eight feet high. It was pushed around a rutted square stone base by a wooden handle seven feet long. The handle was dark with the sweat of centuries.

As soon as Talbot and Stevenson were alone, the attorney walked toward the column of light above an oven.

"I assume we're going to have to fight our way out," Stevenson said.

Talbot didn't answer. He was cautiously making his way toward the huge stone roller.

"Lawrence? What are you doing?" Stevenson asked.

"Someone else is here," Talbot said as he neared the back of the mill.

"Who?" Stevenson asked. "Caroline or more of those zombies?"

"Neither," Talbot said. "Don't you smell it?"

Stevenson took a few steps forward then stopped. He sniffed. “I smell something sweet, like syrup.”

“That’s the sugar cane,” Talbot said. “I mean beneath that.”

Stevenson sniffed again. “Sorry, no. I don’t smell anything else.”

Talbot stopped when he reached the millstone. He ducked under the long wood handle and continued around the base. The shadows, which had been long when they entered, were blending with the rest of the darkness as the sun sank lower.

“What is it?” Stevenson asked.

“Something I’ve smelled many times,” Talbot answered. “It’s like the metallic air you can almost taste after a violent electrical storm.”

“I still don’t smell it,” Stevenson said. “What do you think it is?”

Talbot reached the other side of the large millstone. There was an arched door in the back of the mill. It was nearly eight feet tall. The vertical panels were dark with age and smoke, the iron handle dirty-red with rust. Talbot walked toward it, his shoes sinking into the damp soil.

Stevenson followed him. “That must be some kind of storage shed,” he said. “Is that where the smell’s coming from?”

“I think so,” Talbot said. “Please be quiet. He may be awake.”

Talbot touched the handle with the tips of his fingers and pushed down; the handle groaned and moved. Count Dracula obviously wasn’t concerned about anyone entering the room. Talbot continued pushing down on the handle. When he heard the bolt slide back he pulled the handle toward him. The door creaked open slowly on old, loose hinges. There were no cobwebs on the top of the door or along the jamb; it had been opened recently. Talbot stepped around the door and peered inside, his eyes quickly adjusting to the deeper darkness.

The room was extremely large, the length of the mill itself. One wall was lined with rusted farm equipment, coils of barbed wire, iron spikes used to hold the wire to fence posts, and a block and tackle with yards of chain hanging beside it. The tractor, harvester, plow, and cultivator were rusted and cobwebbed. Along the other wall were seven wooden crates of different sizes. And in the center, lying on a high pile of straw, Talbot found what he

knew he would. Even in the dark, his pasty features glowed faintly with an unmistakable inner light.

"Come here, Mr. Stevenson," Talbot said. "Come and look upon the limitations of man."

The young attorney hurried over. He stopped short when he saw the giant. "Talbot, I don't believe it! He's—*enormous!"*

"No," said Talbot as he looked down on the dormant body of the Frankenstein Monster. "He's very, very small. The flawed product of a great man's imagination—and arrogance."

Stevenson stepped into the doorway and stood beside Talbot. "Is he dead or sleeping?"

"In a manner of speaking, he's both," Talbot said. He entered the room and walked slowly toward the creature. "He's dormant. The Monster lives on electricity. He consumes it at an incredible rate. When it runs very low, he can no longer move."

"My God," Stevenson said.

"That glow you see is from residual electricity," Talbot said. "He didn't have that back at the castle. Dracula must have recharged him, though not enough to allow the Monster to remain awake."

"He feeds on electricity?" Stevenson asked. "How is that possible?"

"I don't understand his biology entirely," Talbot replied. "All I know is that the electricity enters the Monster's body through those two terminals on either side of his neck. Do you see them?"

Moving his injured neck slowly and carefully, Stevenson looked down at the silver bolts. "I see them."

"During our many encounters," Talbot said, "I've observed that the Monster's strength increases the more energy he absorbs." Talbot glanced over at the crates. They were gray with dust and covered by a veil of cobwebs. They looked as if they'd been undisturbed for years. "Once he found the Monster, Count Dracula probably intended to turn this room into a laboratory. One of those crates must have a small turbine. My guess is that Dracula planned to use the river and this mill wheel to generate electricity, the way Dr. Frankenstein did."

Stevenson was still looking at the Monster. “And he’ll probably want Caroline to repair any damage he’s suffered over the years.”

Talbot nodded. “The Monster is incredibly resilient,” he said. “Since he was first trapped in a burning windmill, the poor creature has endured countless injuries—yet he still survives.”

“It’s incredible,” Stevenson said.

“It’s monstrous,” Talbot said. “To paraphrase something my father once said, when it comes to life there is only one professional. Still . . .” Talbot knelt beside the body and regarded the Monster.

“What are you thinking?” Stevenson asked.

The Monster’s eyes were shut and his creased, fire-blistered flesh was utterly still. Dracula had obviously let him get to this run-down state intentionally, prior to turning him over to Caroline. She would repair all the damage and then help Dracula fulfill his decades-old goal of giving the Monster a new, more obedient brain.

“I was thinking,” Talbot said, “that if we had access to a source of electricity, we might be able to get out of here.”

“How?”

“The Monster,” Talbot said. “He’s slavishly devoted to whoever feeds him.”

“You mean if we could charge him—find a way to jump-start him, as it were—he would turn against Dracula?”

“It’s very possible,” Talbot said. “According to Dr. Frankenstein’s journals, brain transplants, however delicately handled, cause tissue damage. They leave the mind unable to handle complex reasoning. If you were to revive him, he would forget that he was ever loyal to Dracula. Just as he forgot, after a very short time, that I was the one who released him from the ice in which he was once trapped.”

“How much electricity would we require?”

“The Monster’s been active fairly recently,” Talbot said. “Otherwise, he wouldn’t have this glow. It wouldn’t take much energy to reawaken him. Maybe nothing more than a spark.”

Stevenson reached into his jacket pocket. He withdrew his cellular phone. “There are batteries in this phone. Will they do the trick?”

“I don’t know,” Talbot said. “Let’s find out.”

Stevenson popped open the back of the telephone.

As he did, Talbot noticed how quickly the light was failing. What little color there was in their clothes, in their surroundings, was being sucked away. He wondered if Count Dracula had put them in this shed with the Monster to tease them—to give them hope, a slim opportunity to save themselves, only to snatch it away before they could possibly succeed. That, too, was part of the fiend’s cruel ways.

Stevenson removed the plate and exposed the battery well. He dumped the batteries into his hand.

Talbot looked inside the well. “Hold on!” he said desperately. “There are no wires inside.”

“No,” Stevenson said. “Everything is made with microchips these days—miniaturized electric circuits.”

“But we need some way of running the battery terminals to the bolts on either side of the Monster’s neck.”

“I know,” Stevenson said. “I was thinking we may find something useful in those crates back in the mill.”

“The crates? We don’t have time to search!”

Stevenson started toward the door. “Do we have a choice? There’s got to be a crowbar somewhere. If we both take a crate—”

“Wait,” Talbot said. “What kind of telephone is this?”

“It’s a cellular phone.”

“Put it back together.”

“Why?”

“Caroline said that these produce microwaves,” Talbot told him. “Is that true?”

“Yes . . .”

“She thinks that they may have helped to restore the Monster’s strength at Mornay Castle.”

“But the phone doesn’t produce microwaves,” Stevenson said. “It uses them to generate feedback—electronic information.”

“Just put it together and turn it on so that there’s ‘electronic information.’ ”

Stevenson quickly replaced the batteries and shut the compartment. He turned on the phone and punched in his office number. When his secretary picked up, she pelted him with questions. Stevenson told the worried young woman that he’d answer them later. Right now, he said, all he wanted her to do was leave the line open.

She did as Stevenson requested. Then he handed the telephone to Talbot, who knelt and placed the unit on the straw beside the electrode on the Monster’s left side.

“This is never going to work,” Stevenson said. “Electromagnetism wavelengths are different from electricity. That phone’s not going to generate enough energy to do what you want it to.”

“All we need to do is break through to the residual energy,” Talbot said. Then he stopped, suddenly alert.

“What’s wrong?” Stevenson asked.

Talbot leaped to his feet and spun toward the door.

“Talbot! What’s wrong?”

“I feel his presence,” Talbot said.

“Dracula’s?”

Talbot nodded as he ran toward the door.

“Wait!” Stevenson cried. “I’m coming with you!”

“No!” Talbot cried. “You stay with the Monster. If he moves at all, even an eyelid, speak to him. Tell him you want to help him. Make sure that your face is the first thing he sees.”

“What are you going to do?”

“If it is Dracula, I have to find some way to stall him,” Talbot said.

Shutting the shed door, Talbot circled the massive millstone and walked toward the front door. The mill was almost entirely dark as he crossed on his tiptoes, as quietly as possible. When he reached the door he stood there, listening and feeling. Something was definitely happening outside. Cool air

was blowing under the door and he felt a familiar malevolence moving toward him, like a mist.

A moment later he heard the two *sarpe* move with slow and heavy footsteps to either side of the door. The baleful presence was stronger now, a cold and prickly dryness that pushed aside the stuffy, humid air of the mill. The heavy floors were pulled outward and deep blue twilight filled the opening, save for a large spot in the center. There, his white features dark, his cape resting flat on his shoulders like a robe of state, stood the Lord of the Vampires.

Count Dracula.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Tom Stevenson withdrew one of the small parts of his life he carried in his pants pocket: a tiny but powerful flashlight he carried attached to his key chain. He shined it into a corner and picked up the telephone.

"Doris," he whispered, "are you still there?"

"Yes," she replied, "I've been listening to your little drama. Tom, where are you? Trooper Willis keeps calling, asking if I've seen or heard from you. And what is all this talk about monsters and electricity?"

"Don't worry about that now," Stevenson said. "I need your help."

"Okay, Tom," she said. "I'm confused but I'm here and I'm ready."

Stevenson walked over to the farm equipment in the corner. He lifted the hood of the ancient tractor and shined the light inside. "I want you to go on-line and see what you can find out about the life expectancy of a—hold on, I've got to see exactly what it is." He used a fingernail to scrape rust from a metal case. "Of a Strickfaden battery."

"A what?"

Stevenson spelled the name for Doris. She repeated it then told him to hold on. While he waited, the attorney began cleaning the old unit. The brittle rubber attachments fell away in crumbling pieces. But the terminals themselves were in remarkably good shape and were easily cleaned with spit and his handkerchief.

Stevenson next set the flashlight on the engine so it shined on the other equipment. Holding the phone to an ear with his right shoulder, he walked over to the cultivator. The attorney easily wrenched a pair of corroded tines from the rotary hoe and went back to the tractor. He used them to cut around the battery, knocking away rust, wires, and more flaking hoses.

Then he set the tines on the ground, lifted the battery from the tractor and carried it toward the Monster.

"Tom?" said Doris.

"Yes?" He set the battery down next to the Monster's neck.

"I've got a farmer named Whitey Cole in Mexico who says that he's still using a truck with the same Strickfaden his father, Blackie, bought back in 1940. He says, and I'm reading now, 'If you lived in a remote place, like we do, the Strickfadens were great because they recharged as you ran the engine and then held on to the charge because of a nonporous storage cell that kept the juice locked in tight when it wasn't needed. Those patented cells were why Strickfadens cost so much and didn't sell enough to stay in production more than three—' "

"Thanks," Stevenson cut her off. "That's exactly what I needed. Doris, you're a lifesaver."

"Thanks. Are you going to tell me what's happening?"

"I can't now," he said. "I've got a connection to make."

"A connection? To where?"

"Later," Stevenson said as he hung up on his secretary.

Putting the phone back in his pocket, Stevenson went back to the tractor to retrieve the tines. He hurried over to the battery and knelt beside it. He rubbed both ends of each tine in the dirt to clean away rust. When they had a slight polish to them, he held the iron crescents so that an end of one was on the positive terminal of the battery and an end of the other was on the negative terminal. Then he moved the free ends of the tines toward the Monster's electrodes.

A small blue-white arc of electricity jumped from the terminals to the tines, accompanied by a buzzing whisper. Stevenson's hands tingled uncomfortably, but he held the tines in place, sat back on his heels, and waited.

TWENTY-NINE

In the distance, the wolves howled with one voice.

"The children of the night," Count Dracula said. "What a sweet requiem they sing."

The vampire came forward smiling wickedly, confidently. He appeared to glide across the soft earth, his cape unrustled by the motion, his eyes level and unblinking. In his right hand was a smallsword; Talbot recognized it as the weapon Count Dracula had carried in LaMirada.

The vampire was still several yards away from the mill. Talbot crossed the doorway toward the left. He kept his eyes on the smallsword as Dracula turned to follow him. Whether Talbot was in his human or werewolf form, a thrust from Dracula's blade would be fatal; the sword to kill the man, the silver to slay the werewolf. Though Talbot was more than ready to die, he had not yet finished his work here. The vampire must perish first and Caroline had to be rescued.

Talbot began backing away as Count Dracula stepped into the mill, the smallsword gleaming as it caught the dying light of day. The vampire's bloody scent swirled around him like smoke. Even as a man, Talbot could smell it. He made sure to look only at the sword and not at the vampire's eyes. As a man, he would be unable to resist Count Dracula's mesmeric gaze.

"You do not speak," said Dracula. "Why is that, Talbot? You are usually so—*loquacious.*"

Talbot didn't respond.

"You are always begging for someone to put an end to your suffering," Dracula went on, "or cautioning another to stay away from me. Cautioning

them in vain, Talbot, for people do not believe in our kind."

Talbot still didn't reply. Not yet. To converse with Dracula was like being a fly caught in a spiderweb. The more you struggled the more you became entangled. Before long you were so focused on the web that you forgot about the spider. If you talked to Dracula, it wasn't long before you forgot about his eyes. And then you were snared. Talbot reached the wall and sidled toward the back of the mill.

"You say nothing, Talbot," Dracula went on. "You understand why I am here while it is still daylight. Not unlike the peaks of the Carpathian Mountains in my beloved homeland, Mt. Mord causes the sun to set prematurely."

Talbot reached the far side of the mill where the shadows were thickest and the straw was soft and damp underfoot. Dracula backed him into the corner, away from the shed. Anything he might be able to use as a weapon was back there. He couldn't remember ever feeling this helpless.

Count Dracula continued to come forward. Even though Talbot did not look at them, his milky-red eyes hung in the dark, beckoning.

"You retreat," the vampire said. "But where will you go? Until the moon rises, you are just a man." The vampire's voice lowered suddenly and he dropped the pretense of civility. "Look at me, Talbot."

Talbot turned his face away. Though Dracula could easily run at him, that was not the vampire's way. That was much too human. He wanted to defeat Talbot without brute force.

"I said—look at me."

Talbot focused on the millstone. He thought back to the worst night of his life, the night he killed Bela Blasko. The rage helped him to concentrate—

"Look at me, Talbot!"

The words echoed through Talbot's memory and his eyes came up. They stopped on the glinting edge of the sword. Dracula's will was great, especially after he had just fed. But that alone would not be enough to hypnotize Talbot. Only Count Dracula's gaze could do that, by drilling into his brain and sapping his ability to resist. With awesome effort, Talbot tore his eyes from the smallsword and looked back at the ground.

"Your will is strong," the vampire said, "but it is not strong enough."

The power of suggestion, of command was another of the vampire's tools. Talbot continued to back away. It wasn't only a matter of gaining time for himself. As long as the vampire was forced to concentrate on him he might not hear Tom Stevenson. And Stevenson was Caroline's only hope of salvation.

Dracula's black eyebrows crept together. With a scowl, he lowered his sword-arm and raised his left arm. His wrist was slightly raised, his hand hanging from it like a spider from a silk thread. His index finger stretched outward and the other fingers dangled below it.

"Come here!" said the vampire, his long fingers curling as he spoke.

Talbot shook his head slowly. "No," he said, more to fortify his own resolve than to oppose the vampire.

Through the open doors Talbot saw the sun drop still further; night was nearly upon them. Before long he would transform into the Wolf Man and the vampire would find it extremely difficult to control him.

"Why do you resist?" Dracula asked. "You do not wish to remain alive."

"I won't add your curse to my own," Talbot said. The time had come to talk, to try to distract the vampire.

"To be werewolf and vampire," Dracula said. "What a glorious combination that would be!"

"Wait until the moon rises and I can make you both," Talbot said.

"No, Talbot." Dracula's red lips pulled into a smile. "I am of noble blood. Nights lived in alleys and on rooftops does not befit my kind." The smile widened, showing two short fangs. "But you could become the most feared creature of all. Sandra's bite was superficial. I will not be so careless. Look at me, Talbot. Join us here."

Talbot looked past the vampire. The first star appeared low over the mansion, glittering pale against the clear blue-black sky.

"I will command Dr. Cooke to become your bride," Dracula said. "You can be with her for eternity."

Talbot shook his head. "Dr. Cooke is not yet yours. It isn't possible for you to possess a victim after a single night. I remember your evil ways from Europe. I've read Dr. Van Helsing's accounts of Mina Seward and Lucy Weston—"

“You dare to quote him to me?” Dracula snarled. “A name from the past, now dust in the earth?”

“His mortality made him no less wise.”

“Wise?” Dracula said. “Had he wisdom or imagination he wouldn’t have tried to destroy us. He would have tried to learn from us! Van Helsing was nothing more than a frightened meddler.” Dracula lowered his arm. He walked deeper into the dark mill. “Dr. Cooke is mine just as your companion hiding in the next room will be mine. I can hear his heartbeat racing. I feel the terror in his soul. And you, Talbot—you will agree to be mine or you will die when my sword pierces your heart. For the last time, look into my eyes.”

“I will never join you,” Talbot said, looking down.

The vampire raised his arm again. “Look into my eyes.”

Talbot continued to stare at the ground.

“Look!”

Talbot’s eyes started up as Dracula’s voice echoed luxuriously in his head, like a bell struck just so. Talbot’s large hands folded into fists and he stiffened his neck. He squeezed his eyes shut. Never in his life had he prayed to be overcome by the curse of the werewolf. He did now.

“Look at me, Talbot!” Dracula commanded.

The vampire’s sonorous tone relaxed the taut muscles of Talbot’s neck, of his shoulders, of his face. His arms felt powerless. Talbot’s eyelids opened and though he fought it for a moment his gaze rose against his will. He saw Count Dracula’s own dark eyes begin to glow satiny red. Beyond them the mill was black, the skies only a deep, deep blue. Talbot’s prayer would not be answered. He wouldn’t transform in time to save himself or Caroline. He had failed.

The red of Dracula’s eyes seemed to expand and a black dot appeared in the center of each. Talbot could not take his eyes off those dots as they expanded and merged and became a three-dimensional black bat flapping toward him. The rhythmic beat of its wings matched the slow pounding of Talbot’s heart. As the bat neared, the red began to turn hypnotically, drawing Talbot into their crimson eddies.

Dracula was crouched just a few steps from the transfixed Talbot. Bent low, all angles and leathery folds, the vampire circled toward his victim's left side. His footsteps were inaudible, his movements liquid. He pointed the smallsword at Talbot's chest. A disdainful sneer twisted the vampire's lips.

"You were a worthy adversary," the vampire said to his mesmerized foe. "It's a pity. What power we might have gained had we worked together."

The vampire drew his arm back as the back wall of the mill exploded and something lumbered through.

THIRTY

As soon as Dracula stopped moving, the black bat and the red swirled together and vanished.

Though Talbot was still light-headed he saw the gleam of the smallsword in the vampire's hand. He moved forward and grabbed the blade with both hands.

Count Dracula hissed and pulled the sword away. Talbot winced as it cut through the flesh and sinew of his fingers and palms. He dropped to one knee and slapped his hands to his chest. He didn't want Dracula to see the blood. But the vampire did not attack Talbot. He was looking past him, toward the back of the mill. Dracula's eyes were wide with fury and he hissed again.

Talbot had heard the wood splinter behind him. He turned in time to see the Frankenstein Monster push what was left of the shed door from its hinges. The giant had to bend in order to get through.

Tom Stevenson followed the Frankenstein Monster out. "Talbot!" he cried. "Where are you?"

"I'm over here," Talbot shouted. "Don't worry about me. Do what we came here for."

The Monster had stopped to wait for Stevenson. The giant stood with his arms hanging, his shoulders slumped forward, his powerful hands dangling, like a marionette awaiting a puppeteer.

"Come with me!" Stevenson said.

"Yes . . . Master," the Monster replied in a deep, gravelly voice.

Dracula watched as the Monster raised his bare, fire-scarred arms from his sides. The fury in the vampire's eyes grew wilder. The vampire stood

facing the Monster. He drew his shoulders back slowly.

"Do not listen to him," Dracula said. His upper lip curled back to expose his fangs. "Obey me. Return to your resting place."

The Monster hesitated.

"No!" Stevenson said to the Monster. "We must leave here. He wants to hurt you!"

The Monster growled, straightened his shoulders, and rose to his full, towering height. His jaw shifted to the right, his thick-lidded eyes to the left. He lifted his arms higher and stretched them toward Dracula, his strong fingers flexing, his hands groping. He took a heavy step forward. The *thump* of his footfall was felt as well as heard. He stepped forward again.

With a venomous snarl, the vampire wrapped his serpentine fingers around the edge of his cape. He drew it toward the opposite shoulder so that the folds covered his nose and mouth. His eyebrows formed a diabolical **V** above the cloak and he glared at the Monster.

"Do not come any further," Dracula commanded the Monster. "Do you hear? Go *back!"*

The Monster stopped. His eyes opened wider and his dull gaze seemed to sparkle. "Mas . . . ter."

"Yes," Dracula said. "Yes. You remember who I am."

"Yes . . . Master," the Monster replied.

Stevenson grabbed the Monster's arm and held on tightly. "Listen to me. Dracula isn't your master, *I* revived you!"

Watching the exchange, Talbot could see that Stevenson was losing; even the Monster was not immune to Dracula's occult powers. Shaking off his dizziness, Talbot ran between the Monster and Dracula. He placed his bloody hands on the Monster's massive chest.

The creature looked down at him.

"Listen to him!" Talbot implored. "Dracula wants to use you!" He stretched his arm toward Stevenson. "This man is your friend."

The Monster's eyes shifted to Stevenson. "Friend?" he repeated dubiously.

"Yes!" said Talbot.

He turned his body slightly so it was facing the attorney. He held his hands palms up and repeated, “Friend?”

Suddenly, there was a blur in the darkness and Dracula seemed to coalesce immediately behind Talbot.

“Lawrence, watch out!” Stevenson screamed.

The warning came too late. Talbot gasped horribly as the narrow blade of the smallsword penetrated his back. He threw his head back, his eyes glaring, and staggered forward.

“God, *no!”* Stevenson screamed as Talbot fell face forward on the floor of the mill.

Dracula stepped toward the attorney, grabbed him by the throat, and threw him violently against the millstone. The attorney’s back struck the base. He groaned, slumped onto his knees, then twisted and fell on his side. He did not get up.

The vampire sneered then turned and looked down at Talbot. The baroque hilt of the smallsword stuck out from a widening stain of blood. Smiling triumphantly, Dracula placed his foot on the bottom of the sword grip.

“You dared come to my home to try to stop me,” the vampire said, his voice and expression rich with contempt. He leaned his weight forward and watched with satisfaction as Talbot squirmed painfully. “Instead, Talbot, our long acquaintance ends with you lying on your belly in the dirt. Not resting, as I do, as you could have done, but cringing . . . vanquished. You never understood what I am.” Dracula raised his foot from the hilt and reached down. Crouching, he grabbed a fistful of soil and held it beside Talbot’s face. “I am this,” the vampire said. “I am the son of the earth. It does not feel your suffering. It drinks your blood and waits patiently for more—unmournful, eternal, inevitable.” The vampire rose. He let the dirt fall through his fingers then wrapped himself in his cape. “I will see to it that you are never again disturbed. The sleep you have sought for all these years shall at last be yours.”

The vampire straightened imperiously and looked over at the Monster.

“Go back to the shed,” Dracula commanded. “I will return shortly.”

The Monster regarded Dracula for a moment. Then his head turned slowly toward Stevenson.

“Friend . . . ?” the Monster said.

“Go back!” Dracula said. He stepped between the Monster and the unconscious Stevenson. “Go back where you belong!”

“Belong . . . with friend,” the Monster said piteously.

In a flash of anger that came like lightning, the Monster bent his left shoulder down and swept his arm outward. He struck the vampire hard, throwing him aside. But as Dracula stumbled backward he spread his cloak. His hands became claws and, instead of falling, he soared into the musty air on great wings. His eyes grew small and round, his nose became a snout, and his ears flared dramatically. Within a heartbeat his body had shrunk and, after hovering for a moment, he swooped back at the Monster as a large, gray bat. His claws dug into the giant’s shoulders and his great wings folded tight around the Monster’s eyes. As the giant struggled awkwardly, the vampire’s thin, powerful teeth gnawed great chunks of burnt, dead flesh from the back of his neck.

The giant reached back over his head. His chalky, powerful arms moved one way and then the other as he tried to grab the bat. His fire-blistered fingers finally found the creature’s body and he wrested it from his neck. Yet while it was a bat that the Monster ripped free, it was Dracula who landed on the ground. The vampire was crouched low beneath his cape, his fangs bared and his eyes flaring.

Moaning and slapping at his painful wounds, the Monster stumbled over the millstone base. He fell heavily against the wooden arm.

“Stay where you are!” Dracula shouted. “I command you!”

The giant snarled and waved his left hand violently in front of his face. He rose slowly.

“Vollin! Benet!” Dracula shouted. “Come here!”

The *sarpes* standing outside had not moved until they were summoned. Now the two large men turned and stepped in through the open door. They made no indication that they saw the Monster.

“Shut the door and go to the shed,” Dracula said quietly. “Get chains. Restrain the Monster.”

“Yes, Master,” the men said flatly, in unison.

The men dutifully shut the mill door and then walked toward the back. As they approached the millstone, the Monster’s eyes shifted from Dracula to the *sarpes.* He watched them warily.

“You will obey me,” Dracula said to the Monster. “I am the one who restored you to life.”

The Monster’s eyes snapped toward him.

“I am your master.”

The Monster shook his head slowly. He touched the back of his neck where the vampire’s teeth had torn his flesh. “You . . . are not.” He jabbed a finger toward Stevenson. “Friend.”

“No,” said Dracula. “He is human. He and his kind fear you and destroy you. Our way is different.”

“Friend,” the Monster repeated insistently. He turned toward the unconscious Stevenson. *“Friend!”*

As Dracula and the Monster spoke, the *sarpes* quietly approached the creature from behind. They were carrying the heavy length of chain from the block and tackle. Each man held an end of the chain in one hand, an iron spike in the other. As soon as the two were within range, they threw the chain over the Monster. It landed around his chest and they immediately pulled back hard.

Roaring, the Monster fell on his shoulders. The *sarpes* knelt on either side of him and with a single sweep of their arms they drove the iron spikes through the links into the ground. Their aim was accurate, the thrusts deep. Screaming with rage, the Monster expanded his chest and lifted his arms; the *sarpes* had to lean their full weight on his wrists to restrain him.

Dracula approached the Monster. “Listen to me!” he commanded. “Dr. Cooke will repair your wounds. You will be even stronger!”

The Monster shook his head as he continued to fight against the *sarpes.* Then, with a cry that rose from centuries of torment and oppression, the Monster lifted his arms. He raised the *sarpes* with them and threw the zombies off. Then he reached for his chest. He snapped the chain and threw the two pieces aside. Rising, he grabbed the wooden pole from the millstone and broke it off in rage.

As the Frankenstein Monster swung the pole at the zombies, smashing bone and skull, Dracula sprang at the giant. But they weren't hands that struck the creature's chest, they were large, powerful paws. And the jaws that clamped themselves around his neck were not those of a vampire those but of a wolf. The gray-furred beast bayed loudly as his teeth ripped at the dead flesh. The Monster fell back again, dropping the pole as he struggled to pull the ferocious animal from his chest.

Unknown to both Monster and beast, the figure on the other side of the millstone stirred.

THIRTY-ONE

Tom Stevenson awoke to the sounds of an awesome struggle.

The millhouse was filled with bellowing cries, snapping jaws, and the stomp of heavy feet. His neck hurt worse than before and now his back was stiff and painful; it hurt every time he breathed. With slow, brittle moves he raised himself onto his elbows and looked over at the source of the sounds.

The dim light of the full moon slipped through the chimneys. In it, he could see the Frankenstein Monster engaged in battle with what appeared to be an enormous gray dog or wolf. The Monster had his arms around the animal. One muscular arm was locked about his neck, the other was wrapped about his body. The jaws of the maddened wolf were locked on the Monster's throat. Sprawled on the ground behind them were the two zombie guards. They were twisted and broken, like disassembled store mannequins. The broken handle of the millstone lay between them.

Could that wolf be Talbot? Stevenson wondered. It looked nothing like the two-legged creature he'd seen the night before, but that probably didn't mean anything. Logic and consistency seemed to have little to do with the sights that had been assaulting him during the past twenty-four hours.

Stevenson turned away. He had seen human and animal savagery at its worst many times and in many places. He didn't need to watch hell unleash its brutality as well. He peered through the other side of the millhouse and his eyes stopped on a silhouette near the back.

It was Talbot. Stevenson's spirits rose—until he noticed that the man was lying facedown with the hilt of Dracula's smallsword sticking from his shoulder. He did not appear to be breathing.

Pushing away from the stone base of the mill, Stevenson moaned as a sharp pain punched through his back; he was certain he'd suffered at least a

couple of broken ribs. But he forced himself to crawl ahead, just as he'd done when the seal hunters had pummeled him with fists and clubs on the icy floes of the Arctic Ocean. Throughout Stevenson's life pain had always been the reward of a job well done. And it had always inspired him to press on.

The attorney felt the blood-muddied soil before he reached Talbot's side. He stopped beside the body, lifted Talbot's wrist, and felt for a pulse. There was none. After several seconds he gently laid the wrist back down and held two fingers beneath Talbot's nostrils. There was no hint of life.

The attorney squeezed Talbot's hand. He hadn't been very happy in this world. If there were an afterlife, he hoped that Talbot would find peace in it.

Stevenson climbed to his knees and leaned over Talbot's body. It occurred to him that he might need a weapon if he were going to get Dr. Cooke away from here, and Dracula's smallsword was the only one handy. Putting his left hand on Talbot's bloody lower back, he grabbed the hilt in his other hand and pulled. The smallsword slipped out smoothly. The attorney made a face as he wiped the blood and bits of sinew on the straw beside Talbot's body.

With monumental effort, he stood and turned back toward the monsters. It was like a tableau from a hellish painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Frankenstein's creation had managed to wrest the wolf from his throat. Now he was attempting to pin it to the floor with one hand while striking it with the other. The wolf continued to bark and snap at the Monster's pale flesh. Stevenson wished he could help the sad, dumb giant. But this was not a fight for men. Clenching his teeth to keep from crying out, he crouched very low, walked past the grindstone, and hurried out the millhouse door.

Moonlight lit the way as Stevenson made his way to the mansion. Except for moths drawn toward the amber light at the front entrance, he encountered nothing living or dead as he crossed the yard and the path. He stepped onto the portico, the sword held in front of him. The drapes were drawn at the windows and he made his way quickly to the front door. He stood to the right of the double doors and listened. He heard nothing, not even the shuffle of feet.

Stevenson's forehead and hands were damp with perspiration as he reached for the knob. He turned it slowly. The door wasn't locked. When he

heard the latch bolt click free, Stevenson released the knob and gave the door a tap. It swung in heavily on squeaking hinges.

The foyer was empty. Stevenson shut the door behind him and walked in on the toes of his shoes. The overlay floor creaked with every step as he made his way down the dark corridor. There was a faint odor of mildew, which grew stronger the further he went. He finally discerned what looked like a cavernous room ahead. It was probably a study or a library, though he reminded himself that in this house the smell of rot might not be coming from old books but from animated corpses.

The blackness deepened the further he got from the entrance. The bold slivers of moonglow that crept under the door and past the drapes shed no light over here. Stevenson hadn't wanted to turn on his flashlight and reveal his presence, let alone his precise position. But the viola-string give of the floorboards had probably done that already. And for all he knew, Dracula's minions could see perfectly well in the dark. He stopped and pulled the key-chain flashlight from his pocket. He wrapped his fingers around the jangling keys and turned the light on.

The yellowish beam was weak but it illuminated the blond hair and wide, staring eyes of Caroline Cooke. She was standing several paces away, inside the door of what turned out to be a large library. Her arms were hanging limp at her sides and cobwebs clung to her clothes. Stevenson also noticed two glistening marks on her throat. But before he could examine them more closely something glinted to her left. Stevenson shifted the flashlight to that side.

He recoiled.

The *sarpe* Andre was standing immobile just a few feet away from him. His arms were not at ease, however: the wrists were tightly crossed in front of his bare chest and there was a machete in either hand, the blades framing his face at opposing angles. The *sarpe's* gaze and expression were vacant and he didn't move, didn't blink, even as the flashlight shined in his eyes.

Stevenson pointed the tip of the smallsword at the zombie's throat. He didn't know if he could actually use it, but he wanted to have that option. Then he shifted the light toward the door so he knew exactly where it was. Turning toward it, he shut off the light, put it back in his pocket, and

reached out his left hand. He groped for a moment until he found Caroline's fingers. He folded them within his own and gave her a gentle tug.

"Come on," he said quietly.

She didn't move.

"Leave her," the *sarpe* said.

Stevenson didn't move. The sweat from his forehead trickled into his eyes. He listened in the dark for sounds that the zombie was moving. All he heard was the thudding of his own terrified heart. His sides ached fiercely and his legs were trembling.

He tightened his grip on the hilt of the smallsword and held it as steady as he could. Once again he pulled on Caroline's hand. This time he didn't speak.

"Leave her," the *sarpe* repeated without emotion.

Stevenson had had enough. He touched the blade to the *sarpe's* leathery flesh. He wanted him to feel its pinch.

"This is none of your business," Stevenson said. "Stay back or I'll use this, I swear I will."

Andre's arms uncrossed in a flash and the machetes slashed outward. The attorney snapped his head back, screaming from the pain in his neck, just as the blades whooshed past him. They nicked both of his checks. The *sarpe* stepped forward again, turning the blades onto their sides and slashing back toward his center.

They slashed over Stevenson's head as he released Caroline and dropped to the floor. The attorney screamed as the injuries he'd suffered in the mill sent ribbons of pain around his chest and down his legs. His arms dropped and before he could raise the smallsword in front of him the zombie stepped on his wrist. He crushed Stevenson's forearm to the floor.

Stevenson clawed at the *sarpe's* foot. It felt like concrete, inflexible and unmovable. "Caroline!" he cried. "Please help!"

The woman didn't reply.

Panicked and groaning with pain, Stevenson continued to scratch and pull desperately on the zombie's foot. He stopped only when the machetes came down on his arms, just below the elbows.

His first scream filled the library.
His second scream, higher and longer, tore through the still night.
His third scream, the loudest, was also his last.

THIRTY-TWO

The gray wolf snapped and clawed as the giant pressed its neck to the earth. Shading quickly into his human form, the vampire extended his ashen fingers toward the Monster's throat. Dracula raked at the hard, creased flesh with one hand, tearing off curled, dry slivers with his sharp nails. When that failed to drive the Monster back, Dracula clawed desperately at the giant's eyes. He managed to force his nails into the soft flesh beneath them and pressed hard.

Shrieking and rubbing his eyes, the Monster staggered away. He stumbled over the wooden pole from the mill and landed on his back. As he lay there, pushing against the grindstone and attempting to get back up, Dracula hurried to the mill doors. He pulled them open, faced the field, and spread his arms. A few moments later six panting, red-eyed wolves ran toward him. They gathered around the vampire, their bodies sunk low in a hunting posture. Turning, his cape swirling around him, Dracula walked toward the Monster. The wolves padded next to him, three on either side.

Sitting up, the Monster snarled and waved a hand angrily in front of his face. He managed to get to his knees and struggled to rise. His wounds as well as his ungainly physique made it difficult.

Dracula's brow lowered as he watched the Monster. Then he nodded silently and, as one, the animals leapt.

Startled, the Monster flailed at them. They landed on him and threw him back, beside the broken mill handle. As the wolves swarmed over him, snapping and rending, he grabbed the pole, pulled it around, and swung it at them. He managed to strike two of the animals but the other four beasts continued to attack with their teeth, biting and gnawing on his arms, legs, and throat.

Screaming from pain and fear, the Monster folded his arms in and then threw them out again and again, trying to toss off the wolves as he attempted to rise. Still howling and struggling, he crawled toward Dracula, the source of his suffering. The vampire stood before him, imperious and confident, his eyes burning.

The other two wolves recovered quickly and jumped onto the Monster's back, throwing him forward. Wailing, he struggled beneath their great weight. But with each pinch of their savage jaws he grew weaker, experienced sensations unlike any he'd ever felt. This wasn't like fire or ice, which affected only the hard, dead, unfeeling surface of his skin. These were awful, burning sensations that dug into his waist, his shoulders, his neck, his thighs. All he wanted to do was swat at the pain, to make it stop. But he couldn't use his arms. The wolves hung tightly to them, making them impossible to raise.

Whimpering, the Monster suddenly became aware of an unfamiliar sensation. It was not the quiet of sleep, the shutting down of his body. It was the anguish of destruction. Within moments the terrible pain was constant. It attacked every part of him. He turned and watched helplessly in the dull moonlight as the heads of the wolves jerked from side to side. As they did, their jaws flung bloody bits of him onto the straw, leaving agony in their wake.

Reaching Dracula was no longer important. Stopping the wolves was not possible. All the Monster craved now was an end to the suffering.

Suddenly two of the wolves left the pack and jumped at his throat, one on either side. They burried their muzzles deep. The Monster's sad eyes looked up at the white face of the vampire. The son of Frankenstein tried to form words. But his lower lip merely shook as a single tear spilled from each eye. The white face became a crooked streak, an echo of the lightning that had given him birth.

The Monster silently bade the source of all life to take him back. And then his eyelids shut and the spark was gone and with it went the pain.

THIRTY-THREE

Count Dracula stared at the gutted and dismembered carcass of the Frankenstein Monster. The wolves continued to poke at it, their muzzles matted with gore as they rent without respect the organs and tissue that Dr. Frankenstein had so meticulously assembled.

"Enough," the vampire said quietly.

As one, the wolves retreated from the body. The dark red blood of the Monster, once deeply veined within his thick flesh, coated their fur as well as some of the straw. Though the vampire felt no pity, he was sorry to lose this creature—at least for the present. In a short while his new mistress, Dr. Cooke, would have begun transforming the flawed brain and the damaged body. She would have transformed the Monster into a perfect guard for the tomb. If not for the foolish interloper who had come here with Talbot, in a few days Dracula would have possessed a strong and utterly devoted servant. Now it would take longer, and perhaps more skill than Dr. Cooke possessed, to repair the damaged Monster. The vampire's one consolation—and it was a very satisfying one—was that by now Andre would have wreaked a terrible vengeance against the otherwise inconsequential man who had caused this to happen.

As Dracula turned to leave, he stopped. The sense of bitter contentment left him as he felt a presence behind him, something primal and strong. Something with inhuman blood racing through its body. Something that moved with the spectral silence of a supernatural predator.

It can't be, the vampire thought. *I've just destroyed him.*

But the wolves sensed it too. Whining softly, they shrank into their haunches and withdrew from the millstone. Very little surprised the vampire but he was startled to see his ferocious guardians, his masters of the hunt,

backing toward the wall, their proud tails held low. Dracula glared at the animals, his harsh gaze challenging them to remain where they were. They seemed oblivious to him. They stopped for a moment when they reached the wall. Then they turned away, slunk toward the front door, and vanished into the blue-white moonlight.

Dracula silently vowed to have the beasts impaled slowly, their craven bodies left to rot in the hot sun. He stepped away from the remains of the Frankenstein Monster, away from the distraction of the creature's dead flesh and spilled blood. Then Count Dracula stood absolutely still—listening, looking, feeling. And he knew immediately who was with him.

The vampire peered past the mill to where he'd left the body of Lawrence Talbot. The moon shined on an empty patch of earth and straw. The vampire saw the spot where Talbot had been, where the tip of the smallsword had struck the soil after penetrating his chest. Talbot's reckless companion must have removed the sword to protect himself, perhaps without even realizing what he'd done.

Dracula's wary eyes shifted to the back of the millhouse, near the shed. There, low to the ground, he saw two small eyes and a sharp-edged line of ivory-white teeth appear from behind the millstone. He heard the familiar driving heartbeat, smelled the characteristic odor of musky human sweat and animal fur.

The Wolf Man began moving forward slowly—a primal force, like the moon-governed tides. The werewolf was crouched extremely low, his right arm cocked tightly at his side and his left arm rigid, extended straight up. The large left hand was gripping the broken arm of the millstone. The great, thick stone moved as the Wolf Man did, grinding threateningly.

The full, very bright moon threw a panel of oblong light through the front door and nearly to the millstone. The vampire moved toward it. He would escape and hide elsewhere on the estate. There were only two creatures on this part of Marya Island who would satisfy the Wolf Man's bloodlust: Talbot's accomplice and Dr. Cooke. The werewolf would kill one or both of them. Their deaths would sit heavily on Talbot's fragile conscience until the next night, when Dracula would take pains to destroy him once and for all time.

The millstone stopped moving. The heavy silence was broken when the Wolf Man growled low in his throat.

Dracula continued to retreat. Suddenly, the werewolf crouched and then jumped straight up. He put his left foot on the broken handle and used it to vault to the top of the grindstone. He perched there for just a moment, perfectly balanced, before hurling himself toward Count Dracula. The Wolf Man roared as his powerful legs carried him nearly half the length of the mill. He landed next to the vampire with both arms upraised. The vampire tried to duck away but the werewolf's claws came down hard on Dracula's shoulders. The fingers closed tight, digging through the ancient cloak and tearing into the parchmentlike flesh. Before Dracula could react, the Wolf Man swung the startled vampire around, toward the center of the millhouse.

While he was being pulled around, Dracula managed to lock his hands around the werewolf's throat. Though he closed his long fingers with all of his superhuman strength, the vampire was unable to crush the taut muscle and sinew of the Wolf Man's throat. The beast easily shoved Dracula backward while at the same time snapping viciously at his face and neck. The vampire did not know how long he'd be able to keep the werewolf's teeth from his throat. His fangs, because of their supernatural origin, could harm Dracula as effectively as a crucifix or stake.

Dracula wriggled violently and pushed his heels into the soft earth, all to no avail. Just as in Mornay Castle and at the police station at LaMirada, the vampire had to get away from the werewolf. But escaping in human form would be impossible, and transformation to animal or mist required him to be relaxed. If his mind and muscles were blocked, then the beast spirits and the elemental forces, the metamorphic bequests of Satan, could not move easily through his black soul—their conduit to this world from the deepest circles of hell.

Dracula shut his eyes and his lips. He tried to ignore the pain being inflicted by the Wolf Man. The vampire had to become the mists of hellfire and slip disembodied from the werewolf's grip. He pictured the thick, gray smoke rising from the cratered depths of the inferno. In his mind, he watched as it curled upward through the souls of the damned, emerging from their mouths as their anguished screams transported it from the netherworld. He saw the smoke churn through the earth itself and infuse his

body. He felt it become one with his flesh, making him part of it. His cloak began to dissipate, followed by his hair and the tips of his fingers.

All of this transpired in a moment. As the vampire stopped struggling, the Wolf Man sensed the change in his nemesis. Roaring and lifting Dracula chest-high, the werewolf suddenly thrust him backward. The vampire's eyes shot open and he screamed angrily as he was shoved through the air toward the towering millstone. Toward the broken handle jutting from the side.

Dracula's angry scream was cut short by a sharp, shocking pain. The vampire's arms flew outward as the jagged remains of the wooden handle went through his back. The Wolf Man continued to push the vampire until the thick pole was forced through his starched black vest and white shirt, through his aged ribs and heart, and emerged from his chest. With a gasp the vampire folded around the wound. His mouth and hands sagged open as blood sprayed in all directions front and back. Dracula struggled frantically against the millstone, trying to reach his hands behind him so he could push off from the stone. But he was unable to muster the strength he needed to slide from the pole. Air and bloody mist spewed from his mouth, which was quivering now. His cloak and shoes began to decay and fall away. The eyes, which had been so brazen and strong, quickly became disbelieving, then weak, then desolate.

As the vampire's lids shut they suddenly vanished. The skin of his face became brittle, then flaked and crumbled away. His clothes, once full of hellish breath, collapsed on brittle bone. And then the bone itself became dust, vanishing in explosive puffs. The vampire's clothes and ring dropped in a heap; the impaled garments landed on top, stained with stolen blood.

The Wolf Man bent low. Both arms were pulled back, his nostrils working feverishly. Steamy red ribbons of blood rose from the vampiric remains and from the tip of the wooden pole. The werewolf was hungry, yet for a moment—for just the briefest instant—a look of contentment passed over his fierce lupine features.

With a snarl, he turned and padded from the mill, following the unmistakable scent of live, fresh meat.

Behind him, the blood of the Frankenstein Monster pooled along his leg and then began flowing toward the millstone. In the air above it, the dust that had been Dracula glittered in the moonlight for several minutes. Then

slowly, with what seemed to be a purpose, the thousands of motes began to collect above the thick, bloody stream. And when they had gathered in sufficient number they began to swirl downward like a pale, gray cone.

Or a fang.

THIRTY-FOUR

The instant Count Dracula was impaled on the pole, Andre dropped to the ground. A moment after that, Caroline opened her eyes.

The young woman awoke to the near darkness, to the sound of her own faint heartbeat, to a pervasive smell of mold which filled her nose and dried her throat. She stood there for a moment, wondering what had happened, waiting for Deputy Trooper Clyde to say something, when she suddenly realized that he wasn't there. Nor was she standing in the police station. She was in a dark library, which was lit only by a small flashlight lying by her feet. Her eyes stung when she glanced directly at the light; she had obviously spent some time in the darkness.

But when? she wondered. *How?*

Caroline bent and picked up the light. As she did, she froze. She saw two men lying on the floor in front of her. One had fallen over with a pair of bloody machetes in his hands. The other was sprawled in a lake of blood. It took her a long, long moment to realize that that bloody figure was Tom Stevenson. She only recognized him because of his hiking shoes.

The young woman screamed a short, wrenching cry before she was able to clap her hand on her mouth. She shut her eyes.

Talbot, she thought. Somehow he must have gotten out of his cell and attacked the attorney. But then she reminded herself that there was no cell and no Talbot. She closed her eyes and took a very deep breath. Maybe this was all a mad delusion, a petit mal hallucination brought on by shock. She would open her eyes and she'd be back at the station house.

She opened her eyes. The hacked body was still lying on the floor in an irregular pool of thick, shiny blood.

Caroline felt desperately ill. She looked away, still covering her mouth. During her residency at the University of California in Los Angeles, she'd treated many grotesque wounds. There had been traumatic amputation of limbs, multiple stab wounds with everything from box cutters to knitting needles to ballpoint pens, and bullet holes in every conceivable part of the body. None of them had ever affected her deeply. Of course, she hadn't known any of the people. And she'd never seen anything quite like what had been done to Stevenson.

Every inch of him down to the knees had been scored to the bone. Every joint appeared to have been cut through. The tendons hung out hideously, with blood still dripping from the severed ends. It reminded Caroline of forensic photographs of a ritualistic murder victim she'd once seen—a young man cut up by Satanists to make sure he couldn't rise from the dead. Caroline assumed that had the attacker not keeled over himself he would have continued the mutilation until Stevenson was nothing more than a grotesque mound of flesh.

Caroline suddenly decided that she should determine whether the attacker was in fact dead. She took another deep breath and held it. Then she squatted beside the large man and felt for a pulse. There was none. Not only that but he felt cold—as though he'd been dead for weeks or months, not just a few minutes.

That made no sense, though she couldn't address the problem just now. It was all she could do to keep from retching.

Caroline bent over the big man. She tugged off his open shirt and lay it over Stevenson's lacerated face.

"I'm sorry," she said. Somehow, without knowing why, she felt responsible for what had happened.

The young woman stood and, holding the flashlight, turned a slow, complete circle. She didn't recognize the big man or this place. She didn't remember blacking out, if that's what had happened—though it must have. How else could she have come here? She also couldn't account for the unshakable lethargy she felt or—

Or the two sticky mounds, like mosquito bites, which she found when she went to scratch an insistent itch on her neck. She thought back to

Talbot's remarks about Dracula, about vampires, and she suddenly felt a leg-weakening tremor. Almost immediately she returned to her first instincts, the thoughts she had had at the Tombs: that this entire setup had to be a sick joke. It *had* to be. And if it were, she thought, she'd find a hole in it somewhere. No one could be *that* thorough.

Caroline looked around the large, well-stocked library for a mirror. She saw none. Holding the flashlight waist-high, she took small, tentative steps until she was certain she wouldn't pass out. Then, walking in a wide circle around the two bodies, she followed the crayon-thin beam across a large, immaculate Persian rug and headed into the dark foyer beyond.

The floorboards creaked underfoot as she cast the light slowly to the left and right. It occurred to her then that she might not be welcome or safe here and that it would be a good idea to go back and take one of the machetes. But she didn't want to return to the bodies. She wanted to examine her wounds in a mirror, find a telephone, call the police, and get out of here.

There were no mirrors in the foyer. The centerpiece was a long, spectacular tortoiseshell credenza against the left wall. On top were a magnificent candelabrum with three glass-faced cases on either side. The cases contained elegant crowns, jewels, and goblets. Caroline laid the flashlight on the top of the chest and picked up one of the chalices. She held its highly polished bowl close to her throat and used it for a mirror. With an index finger, she pushed and pulled on the flesh around the two marks. They were swollen red punctures, like a pair of enormous, matched mosquito bites. The blood had clotted in the small openings and the wounds didn't seem serious, but she wanted to wash them out after she called the police.

She rose and looked around for a telephone. There was none. Instead, above the credenza, hanging from the high walls, were rows of ancient weapons—maces, daggers, and crossbows. The wooden handles of the weapons were dark, stained with oil from human hands. These were weapons that had all been used. To the right, filling the entire wall, was a pair of large murals. The first was a portrait of a swarthy-looking man on horseback. The rider had a thick moustache, fine armor, and a helmet with a red tassel. He was raising a saber above his head and trampling men beneath the hooves of his horse. The second painting looked like a

woodland scene and Caroline moved closer to examine it. It *was* a forest—a forest grown in hell. It showed row after row of naked and emaciated corpses dangling from stakes.

Caroline knew now what this place was. It was that old chamber of horrors in LaMirada, the one her aunt had been working with. It had to be. Nothing real could be so grotesque.

A phone, she reminded herself. Maybe in the kitchen—

Caroline jumped as the flashlight dimmed.

"No," she muttered. "Not now."

She shook the flashlight gently, then tapped it against her palm, and swore as the batteries began to die. In the fading beam, she looked around desperately for a light switch. There wasn't one and Caroline hurried over to the candelabrum. She found wooden matches in a fluted cup attached to the back of the base. Striking the match on a scratch board behind the cup, she lit the three branches. She put down the flashlight and picked up the candle holder. Breathing heavily, anxiously, the young woman continued toward the double doors at the end of the foyer. The silence was unnerving, and it was with relief that she finally reached the doors.

As she turned the knob, Caroline suddenly heard a dull clang behind her. The young woman turned back, held her breath, and listened. There was a long silence and then she heard another clang. This one was slightly louder than the first.

Maybe someone else was here—someone who was afraid to show him- or herself. Perhaps there was a kitchen somewhere past the library; the banging might have been someone bumping into a pot. Caroline decided to have a look.

Caroline walked back down the foyer. She moved slowly to keep the candles from blowing out, though the candelabrum was growing heavy in her hand and she was forced to hold it in front of her with both hands. Her forehead perspired from the heat of the candles and her eyes burned from the smoke.

Caroline reached the library and moved through it, thinking she might find a door on the opposite side and wishing the light were a little more illuminating. She was careful to keep the body of Tom Stevenson beyond

the glow of the candles. Reaching the back of the library she walked along the bookcase in the hope it would end in a door or hallway. Glancing to the left, she just now noticed that the volumes on the shelves were old ones with grim titles like *Terror of the South Seas* by Alex Gottlieb and *The Five Orange Pips and Other Tales of Fear* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

As she walked past the books she heard the clang again. It startled her because it hadn't come from another room: it had come from directly behind her. She looked back and took a few steps in that direction.

And gasped.

The dead man with the machetes was standing beside the body of Tom Stevenson. He was facing Caroline, his dead eyes staring at her. After a few moments he slammed the blades together over his head, causing her to jump. Then he lowered his arms to his sides and waited.

Caroline stood her ground. "Who are you?" she demanded, "and what's going on?" She sounded tougher than she felt.

The man didn't answer. He cracked the machetes together again and then began walking toward her.

She shook her head. This wasn't possible. She had felt for a pulse and couldn't find one. The man was dead.

Clang. He took another step.

Caroline *was* hallucinating—the entire thing.

Clang.

Being in this place, Tom Stevenson hacked apart, a dead man coming toward her brandishing machetes. It had to be a delusion.

Clang.

"Stop it!" she cried, backing away. "Don't come near me!"

Clang.

Caroline came up against the wall of books and stopped. She was afraid to run, since that might snuff out the candles; she also didn't want to turn her back on the machetes. Despite the fact that each bang of the machetes unnerved her, she decided to stand up to the man. She'd taken a self-defense course before her residency and had learned how to do a pretty mean front

kick. As soon as he came close enough, she'd let the bastard have it and then try to get around him.

She switched the candelabrum to one hand and grabbed a book with another; she thought it might afford her some protection if he swung one of the machetes at her. Because her attention was entirely on the blank-eyed man, Caroline was not paying attention to the candelabrum. As she stood there, the flame from one of the candles crawled up the spine of an old hardcover volume. The fire ate the brittle leather quickly and crawled to a book beside it. Before Caroline realized what was happening, a line of books on the shelf behind her was ablaze. The flames leaped to the next shelf up and devoured the books in a liquid flash.

Caroline screamed as she saw the flames from the corner of her eye. She jumped away from the fire, nearly losing the candelabrum. As she moved forward, she noticed the man backing away in stiff, awkward steps. It was as though his legs wouldn't move as fast as his mind wanted them to. Though his expression hadn't changed, he'd raised his arms to shield his face.

He's afraid of the fire . . .

Caroline stepped away from the blaze. Still clutching the book, she held it over the candles, set it on fire, and thrust it toward the man. He slashed at it with the machete but the book was out of reach. Caroline threw it at him to drive him back, then circled back toward the foyer. The man followed her, lowering his arms now that he was moving away from the burning shelves. Silhouetted against the wall of flame he raised the machetes and clanged them again.

Let him, she thought.

Reaching the edge of the Persian rug, Caroline bent and touched one of the candles to the slender red tassels. The man suddenly stopped and lowered his arms; he stood transfixed as the carpet was consumed with a low, creeping flame. Still holding the candelabrum, Caroline backed away as flame raced around the fringe of the rug and began rolling across it. The man shifted from foot to foot, silent and expressionless. He was turning in a tight circle; there was fire on the wall behind him and fire on the rug in front of him. He couldn't seem to decide which way to move. As the fires raged taller and wider, Caroline ran from the room.

Though all but the leftmost candle blew out, the light from the fire helped Caroline see as she hurried along the foyer. She could not believe that she'd left a man to die in a fire.

Not just left, she thought. She'd *caused* him to die in the fire!

But he'd probably killed Tom Stevenson and he had tried to kill her. She'd acted in self-defense. And what in God's name was she thinking, anyway? That man had been dead before she'd started the fire. He had no heartbeat, no pulse, no breath. He was *dead.*

Or maybe she was. Maybe this was hell. As she ran she wondered if Talbot had broken out of his jail cell and killed her, just like he'd killed Pratt and Porterhouse. Or maybe she was on an operating table somewhere and this was a drug-induced reverie. People had been known to have some pretty insane ones.

There were sounds coming from outside the house. As Caroline passed the credenza she slowed down and used the one lit candle to relight the others.

The center candle refused to light.

"Come *on!"* she yelled.

The candle finally caught fire and she moved on to the one on the right. She started walking ahead. The last candle finally ignited. She replaced the first candle in its cup and looked up as she headed toward the door.

She stopped suddenly as a giant of a man stepped heavily into the doorway. He was an albino who stood about seven feet tall and had the same wide-eyed, vacant expression as the man in the library. He wore a tattered floor-length cloak of dried skin—human, she suspected, based on the faded tattoo of a nineteenth-century sailing ship on what looked like had once been an arm. He also wore dirty green trousers and a necklace made of small bones—human metacarpal and metatarsal bones. Tucked in the waistband of his trousers was what looked like a pearl-handled flintlock pistol. There was a matching pistol in his right hand and it was pointed at Caroline. It occurred to the woman just then that the clanging of the machetes had been a call to arms, though she hadn't a clue as to who was being summoned, how many others there might be, and why they were being called. Just to kill her?

Caroline was about a yard from the man's gun. In the instant she had to think about it she decided not to run; she couldn't outrace a bullet. She was holding the candelabrum chest high. Stepping to the left she thrust the candles forward, hoping this man would back away like the other one and she could slip around him—

The man staggered back at the same instant as the vintage gun discharged. The loud report filled the foyer and merged with Caroline's scream. The bullet struck the outside arm of the candelabrum; the impact stung her hand and she dropped the candle holder. As it hit the ground the two outer candles broke off and died. The center candle remained in the cup, still burning.

Still holding the smoking gun, the man regained his balance and withdrew the second pistol. Caroline glanced quickly behind her. The library was filled with fire and there was nowhere to run. She looked back at the man. His ghostly face showed no expression as he pulled back the hammer and held the weapon waist high.

"Why are you *doing* this?" Caroline cried. "Who are you? What have I done to hurt *any* of you?"

The man said nothing. He fired the second shot.

The bullet flew wide as something long and dark literally came through the man. It ripped through his abdomen violently, sending dry pieces of flesh and viscera in all directions. The man lurched as the clawed hand that had come through him unfurled and turned upward. Then the splayed fingers tore backward and up, ripping through the chest, grabbing the chin, and snapping the head backward.

Despite the stuffiness in her ears caused by the gunshots, Caroline heard the man's neck snap. She watched as the hand withdrew, pulling the albino into the darkness. Save for the roar of the fire in the library, all was silent.

Caroline stood with her heart speeding, her jaw trembling, her mind spinning. That was a very distinctive claw she'd seen. The only one she'd ever seen like it had belonged to Lawrence Talbot. If this were him, she wondered if he had saved her intentionally or whether he'd killed the man in order to eat him. She also wondered if she were going to be his next victim.

The young woman bent slowly, never taking her eyes off the front door. She picked up the candelabrum, retrieved the two broken candles, relit them, and carefully fitted the pieces into the cups. She looked toward the door. She had to get away from the house before the fire spread to the foyer, and there was only one way out. Taking a long, calming breath, Caroline kept her eyes on the doorway and took a tentative step forward. Then she took another step, then a third.

Suddenly, she heard a bellowing behind her. It was like the howl of wind through a graveyard. She turned and saw the tall man with the machetes walking from the library. He was afire from forehead to feet, stomping toward her, his machetes still flashing. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he was burning.

Whimpering, Caroline fought to overcome the sudden weakness in her legs. She shielded the candles and stumbled outside. As soon as she stepped onto the portico, a low roar turned her to the left. The glow of the three flames revealed a dark, manlike figure squatting beside the albino. Wiry brown fur covered the figure's face and hands and poked through the holes in its shirt and trousers. It *was* Talbot. The Wolf Man was bent over the albino, the dead man's white flesh coating his claws and mouth—if indeed it was flesh. It looked to Caroline like flecks of white ash, bloodless and tissue-thin.

The werewolf looked up at Caroline. Still crouching low, he stepped over the body and roared again. He didn't appear happy with his kill and Talbot's words of the other day came back to her:

The curse that transforms me into a wolf when the moon is full—a curse that drives me to eat human flesh.

But what if the flesh weren't human? What if these people in this house were all like Dracula—undead?

Her mind swimming, Caroline backed toward the doorway. She stopped as she remembered the burning man; she turned and looked down the foyer. He was just a few feet away, still swinging his machetes blindly as he came toward her. Seeing him, Caroline screamed long and loud, as much from frustration as from fear.

She stopped as one of the machetes came slicing up toward her chin. She hopped backward, toward the Wolf Man.

“No more!” she screamed.

Driven by desperation, Caroline faced the burning man, wrapped both hands around the base of the candelabrum, and swung it at his head. The left and center arms connected with his jawline and knocked him against the mural. He hit it hard and leaned against it for a moment. Then he pushed off. As he did, his burning hands set the canvas on fire. The impaled bodies vanished into the blackening canvas, their tortures ending forever. As soon as the man was standing Caroline cried out in rage and hit him again. This time the candelabrum struck the side of his head. He fell against the painting once again and slipped to the ground. The machetes dropped from his hands and landed beside him. This time he did not get up.

Caroline looked down. Whatever had been inside this man’s head—she was reluctant to think of it as a brain—fell from the long break she’d made in his skull. The gray clumps and smaller gray-white crumbs burned cobalt blue as they tumbled through the flames.

Panting with fear and disbelief but still gripping the candelabrum, Caroline looked back at the Wolf Man. She turned just in time to see him enter the front door. Still bent low, he seemed oblivious to the flames. His claws were open and working, his lower teeth shifting back and forth. Thick saliva ran from the sides of his mouth. His red eyes, fierce and inhuman, were fastened on hers.

There were only a few feet between Caroline and the inferno behind her. Her back was thick with sweat and her scalp was hot. Squeezing the base of the candle holder, she faced the werewolf.

“Lawrence, listen!” she said. “It’s me—Caroline Cooke! Do you remember? I helped you at the castle!”

The werewolf hesitated. He tilted his forehead forward, creating blackness in which only his white eyes shone. It seemed to Caroline as though he were struggling to think or to comprehend. A growl gurgled in his throat.

“I promised I’d help you again,” she said, “and I will. That’s why I don’t want to hurt you. Do you understand?”

The Wolf Man hestitated for a moment. Then, snarling and sinking low on his coiled legs, he jumped at her.

With an agonized cry, Caroline swung the silver candelabrum at him. It struck the left side of the Wolf Man's head and knocked him against the credenza. He got right up but Caroline had moved in and hit him again, this time in the forehead. The monster rolled along the top of the sideboard, squirming with pain and smashing the glass cases. Blood leaked from his shattered temple; his eyes were squeezed shut and his mouth was opened wide.

Caroline stayed with him; she wasn't going to let him get up again. She pulled the candles from their cups, dropped them to the floor, and turned the candelabrum over so that the heavy base was on top. She held it in both hands and raised it above her head.

Suddenly, the werewolf stopped writhing. He opened his bloodshot eyes and looked up at her. There was no longer ferocity in his expression and his breath came in shallow gasps.

Caroline hesitated. Perspiration stung her eyes and she was breathing heavily. As she looked at the now-placid creature beneath her, the young woman found herself wondering who was the animal and who was the creature with a soul.

Then, with obvious effort, the Wolf Man stretched a shaking paw toward her. *"Ag . . . againnn!"* he begged. *"Pl . . . please."*

Sobbing, Caroline shut her eyes and brought the candelabrum down hard on his forehead. She felt the warm blood splatter her hands. She heard the body fall to the floor in front of her. She choked as a claw touched her ankle and then went still. She opened her eyes and looked toward the library.

The fire was crawling closer now. The paintings crashed to the floor and she could hear shelves crumbling in the library. Clouds of fiery ash were drifting closer. Dropping the candelabrum, the young woman looked down at the face of her victim. Not at the face of the Wolf Man, but at the face of Lawrence Talbot. Though blood was still spilling from the wound in his head, his features seemed relaxed. The mouth, once perpetually bent with sorrow, seemed almost to be smiling.

He seemed at peace.

She couldn’t leave him here—not in this place of evil. Slipping her hands under Talbot’s arms, she pulled him from the foyer onto the portico and then down the steps. The fire had broken through the rear wall of the house and threw an orange glow against the low clouds. She heard hoofbeats in the distance.

Caroline still had no idea where she was. For the moment, it didn’t matter. She dragged Talbot toward the dirt road and then sat on the cool earth, his head in her lap. She used her sleeve to wipe the blood from his closed eyes.

The night breeze brushed around them and stirred the sugar cane in the fields beyond. And then Caroline heard what sounded like whispering. She listened carefully; it was the voice of a woman speaking softly, comfortingly:

“The way you walked was thorny, through no fault of your own. But as the rain enters the soil, the river enters the sea, so tears surround your predestined end. ”

Caroline looked up. There was no one there. But she felt a spirit soothing and encouraging her. As men galloped up in odd-looking clothes, the young woman felt something else. For the first time in her life she felt a sense of purpose, felt it right down to her heels. And as she thought of Talbot and her aunt Joan, of the amazing events that had brought her to this point, Caroline knew that she had finally found her own predestined place in the world.

THIRTY-FIVE

Stephen Banning, Jr., finished patching the opening in the basement wall of the castle. He looked over the bricks then set his trowel on the tarp. Slowly he unbent his old knees and rose.

"She's all finished, Dr. Cooke," he said.

Dressed in jeans, a loose-fitting white blouse, and red sneakers, Caroline Cooke turned from the open front door. She crossed the sunlit foyer of the Tombs to where the basement door used to be. She was followed by Trooper Matt Willis, who had been standing beside scaffolding that was being erected by Banning's assistant "Pig" Jenson and his helpers. They were getting ready to replace sections of ceiling beams that had been damaged by the fire.

"You've done excellent work, Mr. Banning," Caroline said. "Wouldn't you agree, Trooper Willis?"

The officer took off his hat, removed his sunglasses, and dropped them into his shirt pocket. "No one ever accused Stephen Banning of not being the best stonemason in the Southeast," he said.

"Thank you both very much," Banning said. After admiring his handiwork for a moment more he took a long, slow look around the foyer. He shook his head. "I've gotta tell you. Even on a bright, sunny morning with a bunch o' people around, this place still gives me the willies."

Caroline smiled. "There's no longer any reason to be afraid of the Tombs," she said. "No reason at all."

"I believe that you believe that," Banning replied. "But for me this will always be a place I'd rather not be." His eyes came to rest on the woman. "Nothing personal, you understand."

“I do understand,” she said, still smiling.

“Anyway,” Banning went on, “I’m gonna go over an’ help Pig an’ his fellas. I want ya to be happy with the way we fixed up yer place.”

“I’m sure I will be,” Caroline said.

Banning excused himself to join Jenson and his crew.

Caroline watched him go then turned to Willis. “I assume the place has a cleaner bill of health from you?”

He nodded. “The team from Naples dragged the water down there, checked the secret room, and looked over every square foot of the place before Tom Stevenson’s funeral. If there are any monsters left, they’re invisible.”

Caroline studied him for a moment. “You still don’t believe there were any monsters to begin with, do you, Trooper Willis?”

“I believe that some pretty unusual things happened here,” he said. “And there’s still a lot I can’t explain.”

“Like?”

“Talbot having been here fifty years ago, for one,” he said. “Dr. Mornay’s reappearance. Though the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that there was some kind of conspiracy going on. Something to play off LaMirada’s past.”

“A scam of some kind?” Caroline said as she watched Stephen Banning pick up a router.

“That’s right.”

“To what end?”

“Oh,” said Willis, “to get you to sell the Tombs so it could be turned into a hotel or a nightclub. To create rumors of monsters to make LaMirada a tourist attraction again. Or maybe to get other LaMiradans to sell their homes and move out. Tear the whole damn city down and rebuild it as a Gulf Coast Las Vegas. There’s been talk about all of those things before.”

“I’ve heard some of that talk,” she admitted. “But that still doesn’t explain Lawrence Talbot.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He seemed uneasy about something and gestured toward the front door with his hat. “Say, Dr. Cooke. It’s a little noisy in here. Would

you mind stepping outside?"

"Not at all," Caroline said.

Willis extended his arm and Caroline preceded him out. They walked through the great door, which was dark and discolored from the smoke. It was propped open with a can of wood stain. Stacks of lumber were piled on the left, along with bags of nails, toolboxes, and cleaning fluid. Further along the wall, a man was working over fire-ravaged telephone lines, which ran under the bay to the castle. To the west, past the drab-green hanging sheets of Spanish moss, the weeping willows and tall grasses of La Viuda glowed healthy and rich in the bright sunlight. Beyond them, the gulf waters glittered, the sky was a cloudless blue, and for the first time in a week Caroline felt rested.

She stopped beside a large rock. She leaned against it and folded her arms. "So. What's on your mind?" she asked.

Willis was looking down at his wide-brimmed hat as he turned it over and over in his large hands. "Dr. Cooke—"

"I'm going to be living here," she interrupted. "Please call me Caroline."

"All right, Caroline," he said. "Last night I read the findings of the inquest of the Marya Island authorities."

"And?"

"Well, I just wanted to know if there was anything you wanted to add to it. Off the record."

Caroline cocked her head to one side and squinted at Trooper Willis. "You mean, you don't believe what the inquest on Marya Island determined."

"I am having some trouble with the findings," Willis admitted. "The judge empaneled a jury in a half hour. They heard testimony from you and the fire crew for exactly one hour. No one was cross-examined. And they handed down their decision by lunchtime. By the time I got down there to collect you and Stevenson's body, it was all over. That's awfully quick."

"Things work differently in the Morgan Islands."

"Not that differently, Dr. Cooke—Caroline. I've been a government employee for a long time, as soldier and trooper. And if I may be blunt, I know a cover-up when I read one."

"You think I lied to them?"

Willis looked at her for the first time since they'd come outside. "Officially? No, ma'am, I do not. Privately? Since you've decided to live in your aunt's castle and I want us to have a cordial relationship, let's just say I don't think you lied—but I'm not convinced you told the panel everything you know."

"But you gave me a lie detector test when I came back to LaMirada yesterday. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes—as far as it went. But your attorney Corrigan would only let me ask you about what happened here in LaMirada. Since the Morgan Islands are out of my jurisdiction, I had no right asking about what happened there."

"But you *know* what happened there," Caroline said. "Dracula's dead. So is his giant henchman, the one everybody called the Frankenstein Monster. You saw the photos of their remains attached to the tribunal's report. Dracula was burned to a pile of ashes and the Monster was torn apart by wolves."

"Yes, I saw the photos and read the report," Willis said. "You personally examined both bodies and were permitted to sign their death certificates."

"That's right," she said. "Marya's other two doctors were ill."

"With what?"

"I don't know," Caroline said. "I didn't examine *them."*

"Touché," Willis said. "You also examined Talbot's body before he was buried. You wrote on his death certificate that he died from—how did you describe it?"

"Massive craniocerebral trauma. His skull was caved in when he tried to save me from one of Dracula's henchmen."

"A different henchman from the one who killed Tom Stevenson."

"That's right." Caroline pulled a blade of grass from the ground and began wrapping it around her index finger. "Trooper Willis, I'm pretty tired. Would you mind telling me where this is going?"

"I'm really not sure," he said. "Neither Tom Stevenson nor Talbot has a family, so no one's going to raise a stink. Deputy Clyde's death is going to

be blamed on Dracula, since you found the murder weapon on Marya Island and it checks out. But that doesn't explain how Dracula got in and out of LaMirada. It doesn't explain how the jail cell was torn apart. And it doesn't explain the feeling I have that you know a lot more than you've said."

"I swear to you, I don't remember what happened in the station house," she said.

"And on Marya Island?" he pressed.

On Marya Island, she thought. Caroline kicked a stone and watched it clatter down the hill toward the dock. The truth was she'd been through two days of insanity down there. The Marya Island authorities were so terrified by Count Dracula—or Gentleman Singe, as they called him down there, Gentleman "Blood"—that even though he was dead, Caroline had to help the trembling governor himself dig a pit in the shed, cover the vampire's ashes and ragged clothes with garlic, and bury them there. Then she had to suspend what little disbelief she had left, take a crash course in zombie lore, and accompany a small group of gun-and-machete-wielding islanders as they hunted down Dracula's wolves and decapitated the *sarpe* workers who hadn't been destroyed by the fire. What was she going to do—tell Trooper Willis all of that?

Caroline regarded the officer for a long moment. *Hell,* she thought. *Why not?* There was no one else here and she'd been a straight shooter all her life. Since the matter was out of his jurisdiction, there was no reason not to tell him what he wanted to know.

"All right," she said at last. "I'm going to tell you what else happened on Marya Island. I'm going to tell you everything, and then I'm going to deny I ever said it. Fair enough?"

He nodded once.

"I don't know whether the doctors down there were sick or not," Caroline said. "My guess is they probably weren't. All I was told by Governor Coldwater was that they wouldn't be going to Dracula's estate."

"Wouldn't?"

"Would not. As in 'refused to.' He told me that Count Dracula was over five hundred years old and that for fifty of those years he'd made life on Marya Island a living hell. As for the rest of the story, it's true that the last

thing I remember happening in LaMirada is passing out at the station house. Dracula showed up and then it was like a fog swallowed my brain—I can't think of any other way to describe it. I awoke standing in the library of the mansion. Tom Stevenson was already dead, hacked beyond recognition by a pair of machetes. I later learned that the individual who did it was named Andre, a smuggler who had been killed in 1932."

"Hold on. He was *killed* in 1932?"

"Yes," Caroline replied. "Like I said, you can believe it or not. After his death he was turned into a zombie, a corpse reanimated by voodoo rites. The others from his band of smugglers were also transformed and all of them served Dracula. This zombie, Andre, was lying at my feet when I woke. I examined him then and there: he was dead. As totally cold and deceased as any cadaver I ever cut open in medical school. I picked up a flashlight that was lying on the floor and tried to find my way out of the mansion. A few minutes later Andre got up and came after me with his machetes. When he attacked, I accidentally set fire to the library with candles I was holding. Andre was burning up but he kept on coming until I smashed in his skull with the candelabrum. I later learned that I happened to do the right thing. Decapitation or destroying the brain is the only way to stop a zombie. It's the one functioning organ they possess.

"As I ran from the house, another zombie attacked me. Talbot killed him. But it wasn't actually Talbot. It was that carnivorous animal-thing he became, the Wolf Man. I honestly don't think he knew that he was saving me. He just had to kill. When he realized that he couldn't eat the zombie's dead flesh, he attacked me. I was still holding the candelabrum so I struck him hard in the head." Her eyes began to tear again. She wiped them with the side of her hand. "When—when that didn't kill him, he asked me to hit him again."

"He spoke?"

"Just two words: 'again' and 'please.' "

"I thought you said he was an animal."

"He was," Caroline said. "Maybe the first blow had started to kill that part of him and freed his human side— Jesus, I don't know. I closed my eyes and struck him again, then I pulled him from the house. As soon as he

died he became Talbot again. I saw that happen, Trooper Willis. The fur just seemed to dissolve and his expression changed from pain and fury to something almost peaceful.

"The fire brigade arrived then and used well water to fight the fire. I stayed at the governor's house that night and went back the next morning with a bunch of local stevedores. We buried Talbot in a field and collected Tom Stevenson's remains. A group of us also hunted down the rest of Dracula's zombies and killed them. You know the rest of the story from the report."

Willis offered Caroline his handkerchief. She took it and blew her nose. He stared at her after she'd handed it back.

"That's your story."

"That's the truth." She looked up at him through red eyes. "See? You don't believe it."

"I didn't say that," Willis replied.

"Well, it doesn't matter to me one way or the other," she said. "The truth you're looking for, Trooper Willis—all of it—is that Lawrence Talbot was a werewolf, Count Dracula and Dr. Mornay were vampires, and the Frankenstein Monster was patched together from dead human bodies and reanimated by electricity. If you don't believe me, you might want to take a trip to Marya Island."

"I told you, I have no jurisdiction there."

"Don't go as a state trooper," she said. "Go as a tourist, a truth-seeker. Everybody on the island lived in terror of Dracula, including a pair of very educated men, the two doctors. Ask them to tell you who or what leaves bite marks like these." She lowered her collar and pulled off the bandage she'd placed there. The two puncture wounds were still visible. "The population is celebrating now that Dracula's finally dead. I was invited to stay for the feast, as a guest of honor, but I wanted to be here for Tom Stevenson's funeral."

Trooper Willis leaned forward. He examined the wounds then stepped back. He put his hands on his hips and stared to the east, toward the iron gates of the small La Viuda cemetery.

“Did I tell you that a lot of people here appreciate what you did for Tom?” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Flying him back in a coffin instead of a body bag. That was a thoughtful and very sensitive thing to do.”

Caroline looked away. “I wanted the people who knew Tom to remember him the way he was.”

“Like I said,” Willis told her, “you did the right thing. It’s also nice of you to have Tom buried here on La Viuda. He was a real environmentalist, you know. Greenpeace and op-ed pieces and all that. He’d have appreciated the fact that someone would be here to put fresh flowers on his grave.”

Caroline looked out at the layer of dull yellow flowers she’d ordered from the florist and planted that morning. She thought of the vows she’d made as she’d turned up the soil with her bare hands, of the goals she’d set for herself.

Willis turned back to her. “Caroline, you’ve been honest with me so I’ll be honest with you. I’ve been standing here listening and thinking and I truly don’t believe most of what you just told me. Lunatics and satanists, those I accept. I saw them when I was stationed in Miami. I’ve dealt with them. And I’ve arrested people who were dressed like vampires, with white greasepaint on their faces and drinking blood from ceramic mugs shaped like skulls. But real vampires and werewolves—I just don’t know. Those are too much for me to buy.”

“They’re part of every culture,” Caroline said. “The governor of Marya Island has an extensive library on monsters. Seems you find the same kinds of creatures in every culture around the world. There are werewolves in Europe, werebears in the United States, weretigers in India, weregorillas in Africa. There are people who think that Bigfoot is a were-creature. That’s why he’s seen only some of the time.”

“Yeah, well, people are crazy all over.”

“Yes, they are,” Caroline agreed. “But are the crazy ones the people who have open minds or closed ones?”

Willis didn’t answer. He looked back at the castle. “I don’t know the answer to that,” he admitted. “As for me, I confess that I *have* seen and

heard things over the past few days I can't explain any other way. So maybe I'd be smart to keep my mind a little ajar on the subject."

"I'm glad to hear that," Caroline said. "Just in case your team missed anything back at the castle."

"Like I said," Willis replied, "the team was pretty thorough."

Caroline said nothing.

Willis put his sunglasses back on and fitted his hat on his head. "Unfortunately, my report's got to be close-minded. So it's going to say that Talbot killed Mrs. Bally and then became a fugitive from justice who forced Tom Stevenson to help him. I plan to call Talbot a madman instead of a werewolf. And I'll say that the fur under Mrs. Bally's nails was from a dog that she'd been petting."

"Write what you want," she said. "It's your report."

Willis looked back at the castle. He was wearing a strange, pinched expression. "So, Caroline. You say you'll be doing research here?"

Caroline nodded. "I can't go back to treating spoiled little kids with their designer outfits and shrill little voices and abused nannies."

"Might I ask what kind of research you were thinking about?"

She flexed her finger and popped the blade of grass she'd wrapped around it. "Legitimate research," she said. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Frankly, yes."

"I have some pharmaceutical contacts, friends from college who could use some outside help creating new drugs," Caroline said. "Maybe I can help find a cure for something."

"Sounds good to me," Willis said. "After the godawful things that're said to have gone on here, all the stories of vivisection and torture and grave-robbing, what you're planning will be very welcome."

"Thanks," she said.

He looked at his watch. "I'm going to head back now. If you need anything, just holler."

"I'll have to," she said. "The phones won't be fixed until tomorrow. Seems the lineman doesn't want to stay past sunset."

“This is still LaMirada,” Willis said, “and some things are never going to change.”

The trooper offered her his hand, then headed down the hill. After she watched him walk down to the dock, the young woman faced the cemetery. The wind seemed to howl as it swept through the trees.

“Later,” she said softly to the cool breeze. “Later.”

THIRTY-SIX

The autumn moon was a clawlike crescent as Caroline stood at the grave of Tom Stevenson. The faint moonlight cast a white glow on the pale yellow flowers she'd planted—wolfbane, a plant that originated in the mountainous regions of Europe and was said to have the power to repulse a werewolf.

Caroline was alone on the island. Stephen Banning, Jr., and his crew had left promptly at sunset, leaving the foyer full of scaffolding and unfinished cans of soda. But Caroline didn't mind. She had bought a sleeping bag in town. After making a fire and cooking some hot dogs like she used to do when she was a Girl Scout, Caroline was going to bed down outside, under the stars.

The quiet here was unlike anything Caroline had ever experienced. The peace reached from her skin to her soul. It didn't ease the horror of the last few days, but it reminded her that for every flame of Hell which flared on earth there was also a cooling piece of Heaven. For every monstrous Wolf Man there was a pure-of-heart Lawrence Talbot—often in the same place, in the same person. It was the yin and yang, the eternal dualism in nature.

Caroline knew that there was some of that intrinsic polarity in her. She wanted to break the grabby little fingers of kids in her office, yet she wanted to develop new medicines to help people. She loved the confines of a cluttered research lab, yet she was thrilled by the open spaces of her own island surrounded by sea.

And then there was this grave. She'd buried poor Tom Stevenson in a sugar cane field on Marya Island so she could ship Lawrence Talbot's body to LaMirada and then she lied to people, telling them that it was the other way around. Only she and Thurman Coldwater III knew the truth. The governor was only too happy to see the werewolf crated up and sent back to

the States. Having two monsters and a small army of zombies buried on his island was more than enough for him.

"I believe that Tom Stevenson would have appreciated this too," she said to herself as she gazed out at LaMirada. "His remains get recycled while Lawrence Talbot gets another chance at life." She looked down at the fresh grave. "The other day I told you to trust me, Lawrence, just like you trusted my aunt." She glanced at the grave beside Talbot's, where Joan Raymond was buried. Then she squatted and lovingly ran her slender hands over the leaves of wolfbane. "I have blood samples and specimens of your tissue and hair. In the morning I'll begin ordering the things I need to set up a laboratory. I'll work days to earn a living and at night I'll study this delicate flower, learn why it repels your kind. With the papers my aunt left me, I'll find a way to remake your cells and metabolism, eliminate your condition at its root. I *will* discover a cure for your illness, Lawrence, I promise. And when I do, I'll open this temporary resting place, let the full moon revive you, and treat you so that you can enjoy the rest of your natural life."

The wind came in again, howling through the headstones and rustling the wolfbane. Caroline stood. She looked over at the headstones of the Mornays.

" 'Godawful things,' " she said. "That's what Trooper Willis called your experiments. And many of them were." She walked toward the graves and knelt on the grass of one of them. "I know, Miklos Mornay. I know because I spent last night looking through your notebooks. My aunt left them to me along with the journal of Dr. Frankenstein. She found them in your laboratory and kept them safe, all these years, in a box labeled 'unpublished manuscripts.' She used them for reference in her writings. The note in the box said that although she knew they could be dangerous in the wrong hands, she couldn't bring herself to destroy them. I'm glad she didn't, Dr. Mornay. So very, very glad."

The wind howled again as Caroline rose. She walked up the hill to where she could see the castle. She looked at the dark windows where the laboratory once stood. Where it would stand once more.

Where the questions of life and death, of mortality and immortality, would be addressed again.

Where universal horrors were explored and embraced, not feared.

EPILOGUE

Dr. Wilfred Glendon III looked up from the writing desk in the study of his spacious London estate. He pushed aside the stack of letters, leaned back, and folded his strong hands on the waist of his brown smoking jacket.

"Fascinating," he said in a strong but gentle voice.

The tall, handsome thirty-one-year-old Oxford professor of anthropology turned his gray eyes toward the shelves and wood-paneled walls lined with rare, natural artifacts. A fossil of the skull of the prehistoric cat *Smilodon.* A hinged frame containing a patch of fur that reportedly came from the Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas—fur retrieved by his grandfather Wilfred Glendon, the world-renowned botanist. A glass case holding the Eye of Ra, a mystical gem from the tomb of the mummy Klaris, a distant cousin to the more infamous Egyptian Kharis.

These and the other relics surrounding him bespoke of a world more astonishing than people knew. Glendon had devoted his life to exploring those mysteries, and very little surprised him. But what he'd just read was more amazing than any phenomenon he'd ever encountered. More amazing —and centered right here, in his own family.

He had just been given the correspondence of his grandmother, Lisa Glendon, with Baroness Elizabeth Frankenstein, wife of the infamous Dr. Henry Frankenstein. The two women had died within days of each other in 1948. The letters had been found in a strongbox at the office of the late solicitor who had handled the legal affairs of all the Glendons. His grandmother's letters were secretarial copies of the originals, made before they were posted. But he did not doubt their authenticity. The replies from Baroness Frankenstein attested to the accuracy of the transcriptions.

The letters spoke of a condition that had afflicted Wilfred's grandfather—a curse, as his grandmother described it, that had befallen him in Tibet where he'd gone searching for the rare phosphorescent moonblossom, *Mariphasa lupino lumino.* A curse that caused him to become a werewolf when the moon was full.

As if that weren't fascinating enough, the letters also discussed two wayward experiments of Frankenstein's. One was a man built from the bodies of the dead and brought to life by bolts of lightning. The other was a woman, a fresh cadaver that had been revived in a similar fashion, with one difference: in her skull was a brain that had been artificially created in a laboratory.

Over the years, the baroness wrote that she'd heard stories of the whereabouts of the man, whom she referred to as the Monster. But of the man-made woman, whom she called the Monster's Bride, there were no stories. As far as she knew, the body remained where she had last seen it, buried in the rubble of the destroyed laboratory. And she had no idea where her husband's notebook had ended up, the journal that recounted the step-by-step creation of both the Monster and his Bride.

An artificial man and woman, Glendon thought, *made when modern surgery was still young.* The genius behind it must have been extraordinary. The things that could be learned from those notebooks and those remains would be incalculable.

Glendon looked again at the vast collection in the darkened room. He gazed at the skulls and the weapons, the gems and masks, the oddities and curiosa. The remains of the Monster or his Bride belonged here. So did the journal of Dr. Frankenstein.

The semester was ending soon. Though the baroness had not said exactly where her husband's laboratory was, she had described the terrain precisely.

Like his grandfather, Wilfred Glendon III lived to solve scientific mysteries. And he knew without a doubt that he was about to embark on one of the greatest scientific treasure hunts of all time.

To be continued . . .